



A
CRITICAL FABLE

P53528

L6131

07

1922

[Faint handwritten text, possibly "L. 6131"]

[Handwritten marks, possibly "L. 6131"]

A CRITICAL FABLE



Dear Sir (or Dear Madam) who happen to glance at this

TITLE-PAGE

Printed you'll see to enhance its æsthetic attraction,

Pray buy, if you're able, this excellent bargain:

A CRITICAL FABLE

The book may be read in the light of

A Sequel to the "FABLE for CRITICS"

A volume unequal (or hitherto so) for its quips and digressions on

The Poets of the Day

WITHOUT UNDUE PROFESSIONS, I WOULD SAY THAT THIS TREATISE

IS FULLY AS LIGHT AS THE FORMER, ITS JUDGMENTS AS

CERTAINLY RIGHT AS NEED BE.

A HODGE-PODGE

Delivered primarily in the hope of instilling instruction

so airily that readers may see, in the persons on view,

a peripatetic, poetic *Who's Who*.

An Account of the Times

By

A POKER OF FUN, WITT D., O.S., A.I.



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN AND COMPANY

Boston and New York

Published *September*, 1922

COPYRIGHT, 1922, BY HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE • MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

GENTLE READER,

THE book you're about to peruse has only one object, which is to amuse. If, as over its pages you may chance to potter, you discover it's rather more pungent and hotter than this simple pretension might lead one to think, recollect, if you please, there's a devil in ink; and a critic who starts without any intention to do more than recount, will find his apprehension of the poets running on to minutely-limned pictures of the men as he sees them. Neither praises nor strictures were in my design for I tried to elude them; but a man, plus his writings, must always include them inferentially, even if nothing be stated. As the picture emerges, the sitter stands rated.

But who would be backward when others have done the very same thing in a search of pure fun? Sixty-odd years ago, a volume appeared called "A Fable for Critics," wherein were ensphered eighteen authors of merit. The poet who selected them dared many sly prods just because he respected them. What a serious analysis may fail to discover is often revealed to a fun-loving lover.

In the volume before you, you will find twenty-one modern poets popped off 'twixt a laugh and a pun. I have spared them no squib and no palm, what I give is a cursory view of them run through a sieve. As I rattle

my poets about faster and faster, each man shakes more certainly into a master; to my thinking, at least, for their rich native flavour gives them all so abundant a claim on my favour that I'm willing to leave them for sixty-odd years and let my great-grandchildren foot the arrears.

With the poets I've not noticed, there's a chance for a sequel, and some other critic who thinks himself equal to the writing may build on my scaffolding gratis; and for readers, I really cannot calculate his — with his hundreds of victims he'll sell each edition as fast as it's printed — I'm no mathematician. Take the Poetry Society's roster of members, brush away all the laymen and leave just the embers which spark into verse now and then; for equations, let A. equal the poet and B. his relations; then his wife and her friends with their "circles" and "clubs"; and the cultural ladies, impervious to snubs, who get out long programmes of up-to-date readings which are called "very helpful" in the printed proceedings of some Woman's Club's "most remarkable year" (one wonders sometimes what the poor creatures hear, for of course they don't read now books are so dear), and some one's geometry's needed, it's clear, to post up the total. I'll not volunteer for a task which requires an expert cashier. For the ladies I've mentioned, who take what they're told as immaculate gospel in letters of gold, and rather than buy prefer to be sold, they'll be moved, I believe, to purchase his anthology which, like Poe, he might call "A Hand-Book of Conchology." Since I've got the

pearls, he must e'en take the shells, but the public at large has no knowledge of sells — see them gape at the lies which every quack tells — and, as I said before, on the question of vails, if I collar the kudos, why he'll gorge the sales.

For I really don't think there's one person in ten who can tell the first-class from the second-class men. If I've twenty-one poets and he sixty-four, how many will stop to consider that more of the very same thing means a well-watered article? In my book, you'll perceive, there is n't a particle of stuffing or layers of lath to increase the absolute weight of my poets, piece by piece. Each is wrapped in tin-foil and set round the core of a box that I've softened with excelsior which, as every one knows, is the lightest of packing and exceedingly cheap; so, if money be lacking, you have only to take a few useless trees, such as laurel, or willow, or bay, and with these make a bundle of shavings as thick as you please. The foil, I admit, is a good deal more trouble. To wrap poets round with tin is like hoisting a bubble with grapples and rope. Do you notice my drift? You can't pull at your bubbles or teach your poets thrift. Having done what you can to arrange them precisely — and, considering their angles, this is hard to do nicely — you should view them a moment to be sure that no jutting or over-sized head will prevent the box shutting; then, just at the last, right under the cover, to off-set any jars, put a thick wad of clover. A few little holes may be left here and there for the egress of words and the ingress of air, and your

poets are quite ready for nailing and mailing. If you're sure of your press, the rest is plain sailing.

Having read me so far, you will ask, I am certain, for just a stray peep round the edge of the curtain I have carefully hung up between us, but this is, Gentle Reader, the one of all my prejudices I would not depart from by even a tittle. Suppose, for a moment, the author's a little just-out-of-the-egg sort of fellow — why then, would you care half a jot what fell from his pen? Supposing, for naturally you must suppose at least something or other, he's (under the rose) a personage proper, whose judgments are wont to sway many opinions, would you dare to confront so seasoned a reasoning with your own reflections?

Where's the fun of a book if you can't take objections to this and to that, call the author a zany, and in doing so prove to yourself what a brainy person you are, with a tribe of convictions which only malicious folk speak of as fictions?

Have I laboured my point? You'll enjoy me the more if you hazard a guess between every score or so lines. Why, it's endless; you'll see in a twinkling how exciting a book can be when you've no inkling as to who, or to why, or to whether, or what, the author may be. If it fall to your lot to unmask him, how deeply you'll relish the jest. No, Kind Reader, I cannot fulfil your request.

Think again of my poets, each one will be lying in wait with some sharp, eager weapon. For dying — why, all in good time, but not plunked on the head by a

furious poet who's disliked what I said. They're all sure to dislike the particular parts which deal with their own books, own heads, and own hearts. All poets are the same in one singular trait: whatever is said of them, that thing they hate. As I wish to enjoy a life of some quiet, I refuse to be pestered by poets on the riot. Having opened my heart, I must seek to preserve it from every result, even though it deserve it.

Then, like most other writers, I've a scant equanimity and scarcely can hope to retain my sublimity, in spite of all efforts to show magnanimity, if any one penetrates my anonymity.

One word more, and I'm silent in *propria persona*: If you, who are reading, should chance to be owner of the volume in hand and a poet comes to call, fling it into the fire or over the wall, put it into your work-basket, under your seat; but, whatever you do, don't permit him to see it.

With which parting remark, I close my introduction and leave you the book without farther obstruction, only wishing you joy of my modest production.

A CRITICAL FABLE

THERE are few things so futile, and few so amusing,
As a peaceful and purposeless sort of perusing
Of old random jottings set down in a blank-book
You've unearthed from a drawer as you looked for
your bank-book,

Or a knife, or a paper of pins, or some string.
The truth is, of course, you'd forgotten the thing,
And all those most vitally important matters
You'd preserved in its pages, just so many spatters
The wheel of your life kicked up in its going
Now hard as caked clay which nothing can grow in.
You raved over Browning, you discovered Euripides,
You devoured all volumes from which you could snip
ideas

(No one need be surprised if I use the vernacular
Whenever it fits with my text. It's spectacular.
And what smacks of the soil is always tentacular.) —
Astronomy, botany, palæontology —
At least you acquired their strange phraseology
And sprinkled it over your pages in splendid
Profusion because that was what learned men did.
Having one day observed daffodils in a breeze,
You remarked as a brand new impression that these
Were beautiful objects; you filled quite two pages
With extracts from all those esteemed personages

Whose sayings are found to their last adumbrations
In any respectable book of quotations.
You heard "Pelléas" and returned in a stutter
Of rainbows, and bomb-shells, and thin bread and butter;

And once every twenty odd entries or so
You recorded a fact it was worth while to know.
At least that was my blank-book, but one of the
"odds"

Gave my memory two or three violent prods.
All it said was, "A gentleman taking a walk
Joined me, and we had a most interesting talk."
We certainly did, that day is as clear
As though the whole circumstance happened this
year.

But when it did happen I really can't say,
The note is undated, except it says "May."
Put it, then, when you please, whether last year or next
Doesn't matter a rap, and I shall not be vexed
If you think I just dreamt it, it swings in my mind
Without root or grapple, a silvery kind
Of antique recollection, that's all I can say.
The sun shone — I remember the scattering way
It shot over the water. I stood by the river.
The plane-trees were just leaving out, and a shiver
Of sunshine and shadow twitched over the grass.
I was poking at something which glittered like glass
With my stick when he joined me and stopped, and
his stick
Helped mine to dig up a long bottle-neck, thick,

Brown, and unctuous with memories of cool yellow wine
From some pre-bellum vineyard on the banks of the
Rhine:

"Berncastler Doctor," perhaps, or "Rüdesheimer,"
"Liebfraumilch" — could nomenclature ere be sub-
limer?

Our dear cousins German are so deftly romantic!
Where else in the world could you meet such an antic
Idea, such a sentiment oily to dripping?
The pot-bellied humbugs deserved a good whipping,
With their hands dropping blood and their noses
a-sniffle

At some beautiful thought which burns down to mere
piffle.

As I rubbed off the dirt (with my handkerchief mainly)
I may have said this, for he answered profanely,
"But their wine was damned good!" I dispensed from
replying,

His remark held a truth I was far from denying.
The gentleman seemed not to notice my silence.
"Could you tell me," said he, "if that place a short
mile hence

Is really Mt. Auburn?" I said that it was,
And went on to observe I had never had cause
To enter its precincts. "Why should you?" he said.
"The living have nothing to say to the dead.
The fact is entirely the other way round,
The dead do the speaking, the living are wound
In the coil of their words." Here I greatly demurred.
His expression provoked me to utter absurd

Refutations. "In America," I began, with bombast —
"Tut! Tut!" the old gentleman smiled, "not so fast.
Fold your wings, young spread-eagle, I merely have
stated

That the worth of the living is much over-rated.

I was young once myself some few decades ago,

And I lived hereabouts, so I really should know.

This parkway, for instance, is simply man's cheating

Himself to believe he is once more repeating

A loveliness ruthlessly uptorn and lost.

Those motor-horns, now, do you really dare boast

That they please you as marsh-larks' and bobolinks'
songs would?

That shaven grass shore, is it really so good

As the meadows which used to be here, and these plane-
trees,

Are they half as delightful as those weather-vane trees,

The poplars? I grant you they're quaint, and can
please

Like an old gouache picture of some Genevese

Lake-bordering highway; but it is just these

Trans-Atlantic urbanities which crowd out the flavour,

The old native lushness and running-wild savour,

Of mulleins, and choke-cherries in a confusion

So dire that only small boys dared intrusion;

Beyond, where there certainly wasn't a shore,

Just tufted marsh grass for an acre or more

Treading shiftily into the river and drowned

When the high Spring tides turned inconveniently
round,

And on the tall grass-sprays, as likely as not,
Red-winged blackbirds, a score of them, all in one spot.
This place had the taste which a boy feels who grapples
With the season's first puckery, bitter-green apples.
Regardless of consequence, he devours and crams on.
Does maturity get the same joy from a damson?
But we, with our marshes, were' more certainly urban
Than you with your brummagem, gilded suburban,
Which you wear like a hired theatrical turban.
You move and you act like folk in a play
All carefully drilled to walk the same way.
Just look at this bottle, we were free in my time,
But I think you are free of nothing but rhyme."
Now here was a thing which was not to be stood,
Poking fun at a soul just escaped from the wood
Like a leaf freshly burst from the bark of its twig.
"At least," I said hotly, "we are not a mere sprig
From an overseas' bush, and we don't care a fig
For a dozen dead worthies of classic humdrum,
And each one no bigger than Hop-o'-my-thumb
To our eyes. Why, the curse of their damned rhetoric
Hangs over our writers like a school-master's stick."
Here I caught a few words like "the dead and the
quick."

I admit I was stung by his imperturbability
And the hint in his eyes of suppressed risibility.
"We are breaking away..." Here he tossed up the bottle,
Or the poor jagged neck which was left of the hot Hell
Container, as I think Mr. Volstead might say.
How thankful I am I preceded his day

And remember the lovely, suave lines of these flasks.
To piece them together will be one of the tasks
Of thirty-third century museum curators,
Subsidized and applauded by keen legislators.
It flashed in the sun for an instant or two,
And we watched it in silence as men always do
Things that soar, then it turned and fell in chaotic
Uprisings of spray from a sudden aquatic
Suppression beneath the waves of the Charles.
"Yet that, like so much, is but one of the snarls,"
He dusted his fingers. "And if a man flings
His tangles in air, there are so many strings
To a single cat's-cradle of impulse, who knows
When you pull at one end where the other end goes.
We were worthy, respectable, humdrum, quite so,
An admirable portrait of one Edgar Poe."
"Oh, Poe was a bird of a different feather,
We always rank him and Walt Whitman together."
"You do?" The old gentleman tugged at his whisker.
"I could scarcely myself have imagined a brisker
Sarcasm than that to set down in my 'Fable.'
I did what I could, but I scarcely was able
To throw leaves of grass to Poe's raven as sops
For his Cerberus master, who would be mad as hops
At a hint of your excellent juxtaposition,
Since that book was not yet in its first slim edition.
You remember I said that Poe was three parts
genius.
As to Whitman, can you think of an action more heinous

Than to write the same book every two or three years?
It's enough to reduce any author to tears
At the thought of this crime to the writing fraternity.
A monstrous, continual, delaying paternity.
But I wax somewhat hot, let's have done with the fellows.

Your strange estimation has made me quite jealous
For those of my time whose secure reputations
Gave us no concern. These are trifling vexations,,
But they itch my esteem. Is there really not one
You sincerely admire?" "Yes, Miss Dickinson,"
I hastily answered. At this he stopped dead
In his walk and his eyes seemed to pop from his head.
"What," he thundered, "that prim and perverse little person

Without an idea you could hang up a verse on!
Wentworth Higginson did what he could, his tuition
Was ardent, unwearied, but bore no fruition.
You amaze me, young man, where are Longfellow,
Lowell,

With Whittier, Bryant, and Holmes? Do you know well
The works of these men? What of Washington Irving,
And Emerson and Hawthorne, are they not deserving
A tithe of your upstart, unfledged admiration?
In the name of the Furies, what's come to the nation!"
Here I thought it was prudent to say, as to prose
I was perfectly willing to hand him the rose.
But I could not admit that our poets were so backward.
I thought, if he knew them, he'd see they'd a knack
would

Command his respect. For the matter of liking,
The men he had mentioned might be each a Viking,
While we, very probably, were merely the skippers
Of some rather lively and smartish tea-clippers;
Or, to put it in terms somewhat more up to date,
Our steamers and aeroplanes might be first-rate
As carriers for a particular freight.
Each time for its heroes, and he must excuse
The terms I employed, I'd not meant to abuse
Our forerunners, but only to speak of a preference —
Anno Domini merely. So classic a reference
Should cool him, I thought. Here I went on to better a
Most happy allusion, and continued — *et cætera*.
I will not repeat all the soothing remarks
With which I endeavoured to smother the sparks
Of his anger. Suffice it to say I succeeded
In clouding the issue of what had preceded.
I enjoyed it myself and I almost think he did.
I admit there was something a trifle pragmatical
In my method, but who wants the truth mathematical?
It sours good talk as thunder does cream.
I ignore, for the nonce, a disquieting gleam
In his eye. "But your critics," he answered demurely,
"For your poets, by-and-by; with your critics you
surely
Surpass what we did. I was not fond of critics;
If I rightly remember, I gave them some sly ticks.
I called them, I think, poor broken-kneed hacks."
"We've advanced," I replied, "to the office boot-
blacks.

We are quite democratic, and the newspapers think
One man is as good as another in ink.

The fluid that's paid for at so much a sprinkling
Is a guaranteed product, quite free of all inkling
That standardized morals, and standardized criticisms,

And a standardized series of cut-and-dried witticisms,
Are poor stuff to purvey as a full reading ration,
Though they suit to a T the views of a nation
Which fears nothing so much as a personal equation.
Subscribers demand that their thoughts be retailed to
them

So often and plenteously that they become nailed to
them

And when travelling are lost if their journal's not mailed
to them.

By this safe and sane rule our newspapers get on
Without any gambling, since there's nothing to bet on.
Of course I refer to things of import
Such as stock-exchange news, murders, fashions, and
sport,

With a smattering of politics, garbled to fit
Editorial policy; if they admit
Puerilities like music and art, these are extras
Put in to augment, by means of a dexterous
Metropolitan appearance, their own circulation,
For a paper's first duty is self-preservation.
If they will run book columns, why some one must
feed them,

And, after all, few take the trouble to read them.

With a pastepot and scissors to cut up his betters
And any young numskull is equal to letters.
He scans what the publisher says on the jacket,
Then the first paragraph and the last, and the packet
Goes off to the second-hand book-shop, the bunch
Polished off in the minutes he's waiting for lunch.
I believe there's no record of any one feeling
As he pockets his pay that he may have been stealing.
The thing would be murder, but that time has gone by
When an author can be made or marred by such fry.
Some good paper is spoiled, that's the long and the
short of it."

Here I watched the old gentleman to see what he
thought of it.

"These reviews which you speak of have one great
advantage,"

He remarked, "they are brief. In our less petulant age
They had not that merit. But I see we agree
On essentials. Yet we had a very few men
Who wielded a passably powerful pen."

"And one woman," I slyly put in. He grimaced.

"That's the second you've dug up and greatly dis-
placed.

Since you criticize thus, do I err if I doubt
Whether you are the boot-black on his afternoon out?"
Fairly touched and I owned it, and let Margaret Fuller
Slide softly to limbo. 'Twas unmanly to rule her
Out of count in this way, but the fish I must fry
Required considerable diplomacy
To keep in the pan and not drop in the fire.

'Twas an expert affair, and might shortly require
I knew not what effort to induce him to grant
That whatever we are is worth more than we aren't.
So I instantly seized on his "very few men"
And assured him that we also, now and again,
Found a youth who was willing to write good re-
views

While learning to tickle the publishers' views
And make them believe he was worth while to back.
"The thing after all is a question of knack,
Ten to one if you have it you turn out a quack;
If you don't, and win through, you've arrived with-
out doubt,
But the luck's on your side if you're not quite worn
out."

"Good old world," he remarked, as he prodded the
ground

With the point of his cane, "I observe it goes round
In the same soothing, punctual way. This pastiche
Of the quite unfamiliar is merely a bleach,
A veneer, acid-bitten, on a colour we knew.
By the way, when it's finished, who reads your re-
view?"

"The fellow who wrote it, on all those occasions
When his fine self-esteem has received some abra-
sions.

Then the fellow who's written about cons the thing
Over several times in a day till the sting
Of its strictures becomes just the usual pedantic
Outpouring, and its granules of praise grow gigantic.

Once acquire this excellent trick for benumbing
What you don't want to hear by an extra loud strum-
ming

On the things which you do and you fast are becoming
A real going author. Then there are the gentry
Who must read reviews to fill out an entry
In next week's advertisement; and others peruse
The paper with care to note down its abuse
Of their dear brother writer, and suck up each injurious
Phrase to retail with a finely luxurious
Hypocritical pretense of its being unsuitable,
While all the time showing it quite irrefutable.
Then there are the sisters, and cousins, and aunts
Of the writer and wrote about; some sycophants
Who pry into favour by announcing they've read it,
And praise or deride to heighten their credit
With the interested person. There are others who edit
Gossip columns, and who must go through at a dead-
heat

The news of the day for the spicy tid-bits
And who greatly prefer the more virulent hits.
By the time we are through, a fairly large public
Has skimmed through the paper." He gave a quick
flick

To a stone which arose with a circular twist
And plopped into the river. "But if I insist
On your people of parts?" "Oh, they do not exist,"
I assured him, "or only as sparsely as daisies
In city back-yards. And if one of them raises
His voice it is drowned in the whirligig hazes

Of mob murmurings. If these men hold the key
To the spacious demesne known as posterity
The gate must have shrunk to a postern, I think.
Every one worth his salt glues his eye to the chink
'Twixt the frame and the door, but it's long to keep
looking

With never a chance to get even a hook in
And pull open a door where it's 'Skeletons Only.'
A notice designed to make any one lonely.
It stares over the gate in huge letters of red:
'No person admitted until he is dead.'
Small wonder if some of them cannot hold out.
As they dwindle away, the watchers, no doubt,
Feel a sort of cold envy creep through their contempt.
Then perhaps the door opens and one is exempt,
Gone over to dust and to fame. As it slams,
The requiem fraternal, a chorus of 'Damns!'
Cracks the silence a moment. More still break away,
But the shrivelled remainder waits each one his day.
It takes marvellous force and persistence to tarry on
When your own special corpse may be counted as car-
rion

And left where it lies to await decomposing
While that devilish door shows no sign of unclosing.
These custodians of keys are ill to rely on
As the last Day of Judgment to the followers of Zion.
There are folk who dress up in the very same guise
And boast of a power that's nothing but lies.
They shout from their chosen, particular steeple
Of some weekly review: 'We are surely the people!

We know what posterity wants, for we know
What other posterities have wanted, and so
We affirm confidently the true cut and fashion
Which the future will certainly dote on with passion.
There is no need at all of making a fuss
For all generations are exactly like us.
We represent that which is known as the *Vox*
Populi, species *Intelligentsia*, or Cocks
Of the Walk on the Dunghill of High Erudition,
Referred to more elegantly as Fields Elysian.'
The matter of clocks may be readily dropped,
Every Ph.D. knows that they long ago stopped.
What are colleges for with their dignified massiveness
But just to reduce all time-pieces to passiveness."~
"The picture you draw does not greatly attract
One who seeks for the absolute even in fact.
That fanciful bit you put in about clocks
Borders rather too smartly upon paradox.
We had a few poets, and we had a few colleges,
And something like half of your bundle of knowledges.
We delivered our lectures and wrote our lampoons,
And I venture to say that the fire-balloons
Of our verse made as lively a sputter as yours.
If things are so changed, what, pray, is the cause?"
I groaned. Poor old gentleman, should I be tempted
To tell him the fault was that he had preëmpted,
He and the others, the country's small stock
Of imagination? The real stumbling-block
Was the way they stood up like Blake's angels, a chorus
Of geniuses over our heads, no more porous

Than so much stretched silk; rain, sun, and the stellar
Effulgences balked by our national umbrella
Of perished celebrities. To mention a trifling
Fact, underneath them the air's somewhat stifling.

Youthful lungs need ozone and, considering the tent,
No man can be blamed if he punches a rent
With his fist in the stiff, silken web if he can.

A feat, I assured him, more horrible than
Cataclysmic tide-waters or Vesuvian
Explosions to all those quaint, straightly-laced folk
Who allow a man only the freedom to choke.

"We may buckle the winds and rip open the sea,
But we mayn't poke a finger at authority."

"A nursery game," the old man spoke benignly,
"To all school-boys, convention's a matter divinely
Ordained, and the youngster who feels himself bold
enough

To step out of the ring will soon find himself cold
enough.

To be chips from a hardened old tree may be crippling,
But it's nothing compared to the lot of the stripling.

For the sake of the argument, let us agree
That we were the last surge of life which the tree
Could produce, that our heart-wood was long ago rotted,
Our sap-wood decaying, and all our roots spotted
With fungus; the Spring of our flourishing over,
The first Winter storm would most likely have rove a
Great cleft through the trunk, and the next year's out-
leaving

Would unbalance the whole without hope of retrieving.

The gentlest of breezes would then send it crashing.
Good luck to the striplings if they escape smashing.
When an oak, having lasted its time, is once thrown,
What is left are the acorns it cast, and these grown
Are the forest of saplings in which it lies prone.
But 'twould be a dull acorn who should dare to declare
It was sprung only from earth's connection with air,
The miraculous birth of a marvellous rut.
Such an acorn indeed would be a poor nut."

He quickened his steps and I followed along,
Listening partly to him, and partly to the song
Of the little light leaves in the plane-trees. Said he,
Stopping short quite abruptly, "I think it should be
Somewhere about here that a house I once knew
Used to stand. It was not much to look at, 'tis true,
But its elms were superb and it had a fine view
Of the river. A friend of mine owned it, indeed
He was born here and loved every tree, every weed.
Circumstance loosed his moorings, but he came back to
die,

To envisage the past with a chill, older eye,
And dwelt a few years with the bitter-sweet ghosts
Of his earlier dreams, with the shadowless hosts
Of the things he had never brought farther than plan-
ning.

How often he wished there were some way of spanning
The past and the present, to go back again
And drink to the dregs the austere cup of pain.
Instead, he allowed the nepenthe of change
To smother that loneliness by which the range

Of his soul might have reached to some highest
achievement

Through the vision won out of a grievous bereavement.
He'd a wit and a fancy, a hint of some deepness,
An excellent humour quite unmarred by cheapness,
But somehow his work never got beyond soundings.
I wonder sometimes if it was his surroundings
Or the fact that he fled them. With a grim taciturnity,
He admitted no masterpiece owed its paternity
To him. Now they've pulled down his house, I suppose.
Thistles spring up and die, and the thistledown goes
Anywhere the wind blows it." "Wait," I said, "if you
mean

James Lowell's house, 'Elmwood,' you can see it be-
tween

That brick porch and that window, and those are its
chimneys.

The grounds are cut up and built over, their trimness
Is due to that cluster of very new houses.

In its rather bedraggled condition, it rouses
My ire each time I come anywhere near it.

It deserved better treatment." "I fear it! I fear it!"

He murmured. "Was it lack of success, or those years
I spent in escaping the tonic arrears

Of a grief not lived through. I cannot bear more."

He turned and walked rapidly down to the shore

Of the river and seated himself on the bank.

Many minutes went by, then he asked me point-blank

Who were the young poets of the day. "Since my mood

Will admit no more sorrowful past, be so good

As to marshal your forces, I shall find it quite pleasant
To stroll for a little with you in the present.

So bring them out, lock, stock, and barrel, the whole
of them,

I'm really most anxious to get a good toll of them.

Recount me their merits, their foibles and absurdities,
Such a tale is too saccharine without some acerbities."

His gesture of challenge was so debonnaire

I could only accept with as devil-may-care

A grace as I could. But our Ostrogothic

Modern manners, I fear, made me seem sans-culottic,

I know that I felt supremely idiotic.

Still "out of the mouths of the babes and the suck-
lings,"

And I was prepared with some brave ugly ducklings

I was willing to swear would prove to be swans,

Or, to tone up the metaphor, Bellerophons.

At least they'd no fear of a chase round the paddock

After Pegasus, who "might be lamed by a bad hock

And so easily mounted" — I can hear the malicious

Sneers of the critics when one dare be ambitious

And attempt a bold thing, yet it's hard to decry a

Flight its existence when above you the flyer

Is gyrating and plunging on his way to the zenith,

And he grins the best who at the last grinneth.

But my unknown old friend seemed to need no ac-
quainting

With this style of horseflesh, he would notice my paint-
ing,

No chance then at all to confuse him by feinting.

I must prove that my horse had his quota of wings,
Was sound wind and limb, that his sidles and swings
Were no circus parade, that the man who would stride
him

Knew perfectly well why he wanted to ride him.
That 'twas bareback or die, that the fellow was
game

For whichever result was the end of his aim.

As I pondered, I harboured no little aversion
At having embarked on so great an excursion,
Nothing less, be it said, than his total conversion.

"Come, come," he urged quickly, "you're taking some
time

To trot out your up-to-date dabblers in rhyme."

I pouted, I think. "Ha! Ha! you're offended!
Because I said 'dabblers' or because I pretended
Not to know that rhyme's lost its erstwhile predomi-
nance?"

I assured him at once that we gave no prominence
To rhyme or the lack of it. To which he said "Good!
We've got somewhere at last; now let's have the whole
brood

In their rareness and rawness. I am surely no prude,
I shall not be satisfied if you exclude
Any atom of character, any least mood.

Give your men as you see them from their toes to
their chin.

Only, for God's sake, my dear fellow, begin."

Since he and I wanted the same thing exactly,
I started to put it quite matter-of-factly.

He had spoken of acorns, so poets in a nutshell
Should please him, I thought, and they're none of
them but shell.

To hesitate longer would smack of the boyish,
And a prophet's ill served by an attitude coyish,
Like a diffident girl asked to play the piano.
I detest all such feminine ruses, and so
I hitched up my mind as sailors and whalers
Are reported to do with their trousers (why tailors
Should so fashion these garments that this act must
precede

Every truly stupendous and heroic deed
I am quite at a loss to surmise). To continue,
I exerted each muscle and braced every sinew
For the duty in hand. In a fiery burst
Which I hoped might be eloquence, I took up the first
Poet I happened to think of, explaining quite clearly
That my order of precedence meant nothing really.
Number ten might be easily rated as equal
To one or fifteen, if we lived for the sequel.
Here I saw with concern he had fixed both his eyes on
That soothing Nirvana we call the horizon.
There was danger of slumber I felt, so embarking
On my story with gusto, I began by remarking
(And here I must add for my just self-esteem
That the minute I spoke he awoke from his dream
And never thereafter did so much as blink,
Though I thought, once or twice, I detected a wink.)
But I'm straying again. I remarked then succinctly,
Without farther preamble:

“To name them distinctly,
There's Frost with his blueberry pastures and hills
All peopled by folk who have so many ills
'Tis a business to count 'em, their subtle insanities.
One half are sheer mad, and the others inanities.
He'll paint you a phobia quick as a wink
Stuffed into a hay-mow or tied to a sink.
And then he'll deny, with a certain rich rapture,
The very perversion he's set out to capture.
Were it not for his flowers, and orchards, and skies,
One would think the poor fellow was blind of both eyes
Or had never read Freud, but it's only his joke.
If we're looking for cheer, he's a pig in a poke.
But he's such a good chap, he is welcome to say
Tweedledum's Tweedledee if he's feeling that way.
When he calls a thing yellow and you know it is pink,
Why, you've purchased his book and you're welcome
to think.

He's a foggy benignity wandering in space
With a stray wisp of moonlight just touching his face,
Descending to earth when a certain condition
Reminds him that even a poet needs nutrition,
Departing thereafter to rarefied distances
Quite unapproachable to those persistencies,
The lovers of Lions, who shout at his tail —
At least so he says — when he comes within hail.
Majestic, remote, a quite beautiful pose,
(Or escape, or indulgence, or all three, who knows?)
Set solidly up in a niche like an oracle

Dispensing replies which he thinks categorical.
No wonder he cleaves to his leafy seclusion,
Barricading his door to unlawful intrusion,
The goal of the fledgling, a god in a thicket,
To be viewed only Tuesdays and Fridays by ticket.
Yet note, if you please, this is but one degree
Of Frost, there are more as you'll presently see,
And some of them are so vexatiously teasing
All this stored heat is needed to keep him from freez-
ing.

Life is dreadfully hard on a man who can see
A rainbow-clad prophet a-top of each tree;
To whom every grass-blade's a telephone wire
With Heaven as central and electrifier.
He has only to ring up the switch-board and hear
A poem lightly pattering into his ear,
But he must be in tune or the thing takes a kink,
An imminent lunch-bell puts it all on the blink.
Some one to be seen in the late afternoon
Throws all his poetical thoughts in a swoon.
He can't walk with one foot on Parnassus, and stutter
Along with the other foot deep in the gutter,
As many poets do, all those who have tamely
Submitted to life as men live it, and lamely
Continue to limp, half man-in-the-street,
Half poet-in-the-air. How often we meet
Such fellows, they throng the bohemian centres,
The 'Blue Cats' and 'Pink Moons' those artistic fre-
quenters
Who eat at the house's expense for the fame

Their presence ensures have conceived as a name
Full of rich innuendo. Though why a strange hue
Connected with something — moons pink or cats blue —
Should make it so vicious, I can't see, can you?
These double-paced bardlings are marvels at talking,
But their writing seems curiously given to balking,
A result, like as not, of their manner of walking.
Not so Frost, he divides his life into two pieces,
Keeping one for himself while the other he leases
To various colleges. He's eclectic in choice
And at least half-a-dozen have cause to rejoice
That he's sojourned among them; for his unique duty,
What they pay him to do and regard as their booty,
Is the odd one of being on hand, nothing more.
He's an unexplored mine you know contains ore;
Or rather, he acts as a landscape may do
Which says one thing to me and another to you,
But which all agree is a very fine view.
Such a sight is experience, a wonderful thing
To have looked at and felt. This establishing
Of a poet in a college like a bird in a cage
Is a happy endowment for art which our age
Is the first to have thought of and made quite the rage.
That the poet cannot function while kept as a zoo,
Does not matter at all to the wiseacres who
Invented the scheme. They secure for the year
That desideratum, a high atmosphere.
If the poet who provides it be drained to the pith,
That is nothing to leaving their college a myth,
A tradition, to hand down to all future classes.

A thing and its shadow are one to the masses.
The man's written his poems, now he can recite them;
As for new ones, he is a great fool to invite them,
Notoriety offers a constant repose,
Like a time-honoured rose-bush which now bears no
 rose.

Instead of one poet, we've a score of poetasters.
Are we wise in our method or ignorant wasters?
Frost suffers himself to be bled for the small fry
While Pegasus, never a quiescent palfrey,
Stamps at the hitching-post. Still, I'm not saying
There is really much harm in this lengthy delaying.
There's the other half-year and his telegraph grasses
And no college thrives on a diet of asses;
A man must be sacrificed now and again
To provide for the next generation of men.
So if, once in a while, a real poet is captured
And bled for the future, we should all be enraptured.
The violence done to his own special nature
Is a thing of no moment if he add to the stature
Of a handful of students, and business is booming
For the troubadour poets in the town he's illuming.
They come, called in shoals by the interest he rouses,
And talk of themselves to preposterous houses.
But who, in the end, has the best of the luck,
The migrating birds or the poor decoy duck?
Small surprise, when Commencement has ended the
 year,
If our poet's first free action is to disappear.
Chained up on a campus creating diurnal

Poetic fine weather must be an eternal
Annoyance, a horror, growing always more biting.
How pleasant his mountains must look, how exciting
The long leisured moments to think, with no gaping
Importunate youths whose lives he is shaping
Forever observing his least little movement.
Why, a bleak desert island would be an improvement
On such an existence. Though we should be proud
That there is such a man to let loose on a crowd
Of young bears, any one of whom may become President,

We should be even prouder to know him a resident
Of our woods and our hills, a neighbour of neighbours,
A singer of country-sides and country labours,
Like a hermit thrush deep in a wood whose fresh fire
Of song burns the whole air to music, and higher
Up-soars till it seems not one voice but a choir—
The choir of his people whose hearths are the altars
Of that deep race-religion which in him never falters,
His life is its worship, his songs are its psalters.
Prophet, seer, psalmist, is the world so importunate
As to leave you no peace even here? You are fortunate
At least to abide, remote as the fables,
In a place much neglected by railroad time-tables.
I promise, for one, when I turn from the wicket,
That the name of your town will not be on my ticket.
You have as much right to protect your seclusion
As any old monk of the order Carthusian,
Though solitude really is but an illusion
As most men find out to their utter confusion.

To speak of seclusion is to think of a man
Who is built on a totally otherwise plan.
I mean, and I rather imagine you know it,
Edwin Arlington Robinson, excellent poet,
And excellent person, but vague as a wood
Gazed into at dusk. His preponderant mood
Is withdrawal, and why? For a man of his stamp,
So conscious of people, it seems odd to scamp
Experience and contact, to live in a hollow
Between the four winds and perpetually swallow
The back draughts of air from a swift forward motion.
It takes a huge strength to withstand all emotion,
But Robinson stays with his feet planted square
In the middle of nothing, the vacuum where
The world's swinging starts and whirls out, where is left
The dead root of movement, an emptiness cleft
In the heart of an aim, of all aims, peering out
At the dust and the grass-blades that swirl all about.
He notes who is here, who is coming along,
Who has passed by alone, who is one of a throng.
He peers with intentness bent all into seeing,
A critical eye finely pointed on being.
He is cruel with dispassion, as though he most dreaded
Some shiver of feeling might yet be imbedded
Within him. And if this occurrence should happen,
He would probably see himself with a fool's cap on
And feel himself sinking to shipwreck at once;
Of the two, much preferring disaster to dunce.
For the dunce is contingent on a sort of curse

He thinks he is doomed with. A curious, perverse
Undercutting of Fate which decrees him observer
And hoods him in ice from all possible fervour.
The slightest conceivable hint of a thaw
Wounds his conscience as though he had broken a law
He had sworn to uphold. Are there demons in hiding
Within his ice-mail? Can he feel them abiding
A time to break loose and disrupt into tatters
The scheme of existence he has taught himself matters,
A barrier raised betwixt him and his satyrs?
For he has them; his quaint, artificial control
Is a bandage drawn tightly to hold down his soul.
Should a nail or a thorn tear the least little mesh, it
Would let all his nature go leaping in freset
Overflowing his banks and engulfing his dams
In a flurry of life. But the desolate calms
He has cherished so long would be lost in the slams,
The torrential vortices of a swift current
Exploding in motion. Some uncouth, deterrent
Complex in his make-up enforces recoil
Before the fatigue and the wrench of turmoil.
He compounds with inertia by calling it Fate,
Deeply dreading the rush of emotion in spate,
Distrusting his power to outwit disaster
In the realization that with him fast means faster,
And refusing to see that a turbulent strife
Is the valuable paradox given to life
Which only the few may possess. With the prize
In his hand, he turns sadly away, crucifies
His manhood each day with the old dog's-eared lies,

The heritage, left by those Puritan heirs.
His bogies and satyrs are grandsons of theirs.
Could he see them as fruit-trees distorted by mist,
He might unknot himself from the terrible twist
He has suffered through fear of them. Now, with
 vicarious

Experience in verse, he cheats all the various
Impulses within him which make him a poet;
But, try as he will, his poems all show it.
His tight little verses an inch in diameter,
His quatrains and whole-book-long tales in pentameter,
With never a hint of what he'd call a sham metre,
Though some people style his kind *ad nauseam* metre —
With gimlets for eyes and a sensitive heart,
All battened down tight in the box of his art,
And we have his rare merits and his strange deficiencies
Which mix to a porridge of peculiar efficiencies.
Admired by every one dowered with wit,
He has scarcely the qualifications to hit
The unlettered public, but the fact that his name
Is already spotted with the lichens of fame
Opens up a most fecund and pertinent query
And is one of the pedestals on which my theory
Is based: whether now we have not reached the stage
Of a perfectly genuine coming-of-age.
I am willing to swear that when he has retired
His books will be listed as 'reading required,'
And poor sweltering youths taking examinations
Will crown him with the bays of their wild lamenta-
 tions.

Our beautiful system is to make every course able
To render delight quite sterile through forcible
Insistence upon it. But these are the laurels
With which no man who's not insane ever quarrels.
Perhaps it's as well not to look at the guerdon
Too closely or no one would shoulder the burden
Of being a poet.

The next I shall take up
Is a fellow as utterly different in make-up
As you're likely to see if you scour the land
With field-glasses and microscopes. This is Carl Sand-
burg, a strange, gifted creature, as slow as a fog
Just lifting to sunshine, a roughly hewn Gog,
Shorn of his twin Magog, set over the portal
Through which brawls the stream of everything mortal.
Day and night he observes it, this river of men,
With a weary-sweet, unflagging interest, and ten
Times in a day he seeks to detach
Himself from the plinth where he's destined to watch,
And mingle as one of them, mistaking his stature
To be but that generally ordained by nature
For the run of humanity. His miscalculations
Of the possible height to which civilizations
May rightly aspire are constantly leading
Him into positions whence there's no proceeding.
Because he can easily reach to the stars,
He cannot believe that a short arm debars
Any others from doing the same, and declares
His qualifications assuredly theirs.

Endowing each man whom he meets with his own
Stretch and feeling, he takes for the foundation stone
Of his creed the ability to walk cheek by jowl
With the sun, at the same time not losing control
Of feet always set on the earth. It is droll
To hear him announce neither giants nor pigmies
Exist, that there's only one knowable size,
Which by implication's as tall as the skies.
What he feels about souls, he has brought into speech,
But since perfect English is a hard thing to teach
To those brought up without it, he changes his tactics
And declares correct use the hypochondriactics
Of language too timid for red-blooded slang.
This theory of his is a swift boomerang
Overturning his balance and flooring him pell-mell, he
Presents the strange sight of a man on his belly
Proclaiming that all men walk that way from preference
And the manner, though new, must be treated with
 deference.
Since his own natural speech is correct to a dot,
His theory, to use the red-blooded, is 'rot,'
And as man does not wiggle along like a jelly
When he walks, to affect that laid flat on the belly
Is the easiest position to attain locomotion
Must surely be called a preposterous notion.
But what's the poor fellow to do? It is plain
He overtops folk if he stands; once again
It's the hill and Mohammed, since he can't raise the
 others
He must lie if he'd be the same height as his brothers.

It may weary his readers to see a true poet
Who apparently has not the instinct to know it,
And so burdens his beauty with wild propaganda
That much of his work is a hideous slander
Against his remarkable genius, but scratch it
With a prudent pen-knife and there's nothing to
match it

Going on in the whole world to-day. He has sight
Of a loveliness no man has seen, and a might,
A great flowing power of words to express
Its hugeness and littleness. All the excess
Of his passion for living leaps out from his pen
In a gush of fresh imminence; again and again
We read him to fill our soul's withering lungs
With the wind-over-water sweep which is his tongue's
Particular gift — though I should have said 'prairies,'
Not 'water,' he is no result of the seas,
But in every whiff of him, flat and extended,
A man of the plains, whose horizons are ended
By the upreach of earth to that sky which he touches
And carries off great fragments of in his clutches.
Wood-smoke, and water-smoke rising from runnels
At sunrise, long lines of black smoke from the funnels
Of engines and factories, steel of man's forging
And steel he's forged into; the slow, passive gorging
Of earth with mankind, blood of souls, blood of hearts,
Swallowed into the fields where the sprouting grain
parts

A right rail from a left rail, and always asunder
Go marching the fields cleft in two by the wonder

Of man gauging distance as magic and burning it
Under boot-heels or car-wheels and all the time earning it

For the silt of his mind from which a new soil
Is gradually risen. This turgescient coil
Is the crawling of glaciers, the upheave of hills,
The process of making and change, the huge spills
Of watersheds seeking their oceans, the miracle
Of creeping continuance. This is the lyrical
Stuff Sandburg works into something as lazy
And deep as geology planting its clays, he
Makes keenly, unhastingly, as evolution,
And yet, poor blind eagle, he dreams revolution.
With the centuries his if he could but decide
To pocket his picayune, popular pride,
Give up his day-dreams and his tin-penny logic,
Be Gog as God made him and not demagogic,
Sit solidly down with his eyes and his heart,
And a file and a chisel, to fashion great art —
If he would, but will he? It really is vexing
To see such a fellow perpetually flexing
His knees to false idols, a mere artizan
When he might be an artist. Some historian
Of the future will round him up in an abstract
By denouncing the times as too matter-of-fact,
Not observing what might well be seen for the looking

That it's simply a case of not quite enough cooking.
An accredited hero or a dream-blinded sloven
Is entirely a matter of stoking the oven.

The material's certainly A number one,
It will be his own fault if he dies underdone.

The man whom I next shall bring to the fore
Is becoming, I fear, an impossible bore.
Some few years ago, Minerva mislaid
Her glasses, and unable to see in the shade,
Feeling also, quite naturally, rather afraid
To proclaim that she wore them, like any old maid
Teaching school — for a Goddess is loath to parade
Her antiquity, even as others — she said
No word of the matter at home on Olympus.
A pity, because a very bad *impasse*
Might have so been averted. The handmaids and
 lackeys,
Who are always possessed of both front door and back
 keys,
Would have hunted the palace from cellar to roof
And most probably found them not very aloof
From the spot where poor Vulcan, in playing Tar-
 tuffe,
Had received a convincing and permanent proof
That the lady was chaste. Indeed, however frigid,
No woman of spirit admits to the rigid
Mathematical count of the years after forty,
And even immortals, though reputed quite 'sporty,'
And figuring time by the so many centuries,
Still scarcely desire to add up the entries
And publish the total. Minerva, then, hid
The fact that she could not quite see what she did,

And since it would give things away to inquire, 'Oh
She could not do that!' And after a *giro*
Which blindly confused every main street and by-
row,

In the end she conferred a great book on a tyro.
The author in question, though an excellent notary,
Could scarcely be classed at that time as a votary
Worth Minerva's attention. But, however unsuitable,
The deed, once accomplished, became quite immu-
table.

No matter how foolish she felt, the poor Goddess
Must carry it through in a pitiless progress.
For be sure, when her family learnt of her blunder,
Which they very soon did, she'd have welcomed Jove's
thunder

To be quit of his really abominable quizzing.
His jokes were caught up by Neptune and sent whizzing
For Vulcan to cap them, and as he was still smarting
Beneath the rebuke she'd not spared him at parting,
He gave her good measure now he'd got the upper
Hand. Then the women joined in; what at supper
Was observed was rehashed for breakfast and dinner,
Even Venus said 'Minnie, you *have* picked a winner!
From all that I hear, your man is verbose.
He'll print in ten volumes, a very large dose
For you to inspire.' 'Oh, Minnie is game,'
Cried Mercury, kind-hearted boy. 'All the same,'
Growled Vulcan, 'if Min can hold out, 'twould be
speedier

To imbue him at once with an encyclopedia.'

Here Minerva, in tears which begemmed her found
glasses,

Declared her relations were all of them asses,
That she cared not a fig for their tuppenny threats
Having settled the book to be done in vignettes.
The Gods broke out laughing. 'Give Minnie the han-
dle

And not one of you is worth even her sandal,'
Shouted Jove, 'she's arranged for a *succès de scandal*.'
Which she had, and her poet, never doubting the giver,
Wrote steadily on without the least quiver,
And at last, in due course, was published 'Spoon
River.'

Now having explained the volume's true genesis,
Let me say it is not for a party where tennis is
In order, or bridge. If you like porcupining
Your soul with your conscience, here's a chance for
refining

On misery, and since Minerva'd a hand in it
No person need doubt that there's plenty of sand in it.
Of course the thing's genius no matter how squint-eyed,
And the reader who never once weeps must be flint-
eyed.

But hey, Mr. Masters, how weary and dreary
You make all your folk! How impossibly smeary
And sticky they are with old amorous contacts,
A series of ticketed, sexual facts
Tucked away, all unwashed, in the ground. Who once
told you

The great, biological truths with a few

Dirty smudges you've never forgotten, like plasters
Thumbed tight to your mind? They're the trade-mark
of 'Masters.'

Whatever he's writing — Minerva inspired
As this book, 'Spoon River'; or, nervous and tired,
Worrying his public as a dog does a bone
As in 'Domesday Book,' done, you'll agree, quite
alone —

They all have the stamp of back-alley lust
Which you stand as you can, for stand it you must
If you'd read him at all. I've no wish to cloud over
The fame of a book which, from cover to cover,
Shows the trace of Minerva's most helpful collusion.
The hall-marks of genius are here in profusion.
People swarm through its pages like ants in a hill,
No one's like the others, a personal will
Makes each man what he is and his life what it was.
The modern Balzac? Not at all — the new 'Boz!'
Where the Frenchman employed an urbane modera-
tion,

The Englishman gloried in exaggeration.
But, in spite of his gargoyles, his fine gift of humour
Kept even his quaintness from the taint of ill-rumour.
In a grin of delight, he played tricks with his drawing,
And no matter how far from the real he was yawning
His object were merely a louder guffawing.
He never believed his grotesques were true pictures
Of life, he knew perfectly well men are mixtures
Of rather more this or a little less that;
No man is pure angel and none is sheer brat.

Where he painted them so, it was done to enhance
Some meaning he wished to make clear; circum-
stance

Induced him to stress both the gall and the honey,
And no one knew better just when to be funny.

✓ Mr. Masters, quite otherwise, thinks his creations
Reveal abstract truth in their vilest relations.

He sees every one as the suffering prey
Of some low, hidden instinct, his business to flay
The decency off them and show them all naked,
A few of them zanies, the rest downright wicked.
In all his vast gallery there's but one exception,
And that, I hold, is to have wrought with deception.

If some excellent sense of the really amusing
Had led him to practise a little more fusing
Of the good and the bad, his book had succeeded
In being the great masterpiece we have needed
Ever since the beginning. As it is, his caprice
Has given us only a great Masters' piece.

How Minerva deserted him all through the sequel,
We can easily see if we hunt for an equal
Success in the list of his subsequent works.

Each hitches along in a series of jerks.

He tries lyrics, and ballads, and novels in verse,
But lacks always the wit to return to the terse.

In the last, 'Domesday Book,' he relied upon Brown-
ing

To replace Minerva and keep him from drowning.
Shallow hope! He achieved a self-hitting satire,
Mr. Masters looked so odd in Browning's attire.

The huge bulk of his book brought to mind the old
fable

Of the bull-frog who, seeing an ox in the stable,
Puffed up till he burst in a vain-glorious trying
To attain the same size. But no magnifying
Can make of unripeness a thing brought to a finish,
For blowing it up only makes it look thinnish.
If asked my opinion, I think that Minerva
Was cruel to abandon the rôle of preserver.
To lift a man suddenly out of obscurity
And leave him quite solus in his prematurity
Was not, I think, cricket. (I like to imply an
Acquaintance with idioms as remote as the Chian,
They read like a dash of the pepper called Cayenne.)
To conclude, I believe, when the Gods have done chaff-
ing,

Minerva will one morning catch herself laughing,
And, as laughing's a good-natured act to fall into,
I should not be surprised if she found she had been
too

High-handed and harsh in her speedy desertion
Of an author who might have become her diversion
Had her relatives not been so prompt with their jeers.
Then, totalling up the count of the years
And the works she'd permitted her erstwhile protégé
To publish without her assistance, 'Heyday!'
I can hear her exclaiming. 'This will scarcely redound
To my credit, and since the world knows that I found
Him and helped him, I really think it would be better
If I helped him again to become the begetter

Of another 'Spoon River,' or at least some quite fine
thing

Which folk will acknowledge to be a divine thing.'

I should not be astonished if, touched to the marrow,

Minerva set out in her largest Pierce Arrow,

Or else (since I would not pretend to a choice)

Departed in her most expensive Rolls-Royce,

With a dozen or two extremely sharp axes,

Three or four different saws, and various waxes,

A hammer and nails, also scissors and strings,

The whole bundle of tools which a good workman
brings

To a job who's no wish to go back for his 'things.'

Arriving *chez* Masters, there'll be a short parley,

And I conjure the world not to miss the finale."

At this point in my tale, there suddenly grew

On my ear a low sound like wind sweeping through

Many acres of pine-trees; but, even as I listened,

It changed into bird-calls which merrily glistened

Like sun-spattered feathers of tone through the glanc-
ing

Of leaves over water where shadows are dancing.

Once again was a change, and I heard the low roar

Of surf beating up against a rock shore;

This gave place to the clanging of bells over valleys

And the long monotone of horns blown from Swiss
chalêts.

I'd scarcely determined that fact when again

It transmuted itself into pattering rain,

Which fused in its turn to harsh drums and to blares
Of tin trumpets, the kind that you meet with at fairs.
But before I'd accustomed myself to the noise,
It rose quiet, single, enduring in poise,
Held high to a balance above growling thunder
As though I were harkening to the world's wonder,
The organ at Harlem, while the "Mourning of Rachel"
Was played — and I knew I was listening to Vachel.
"Who else has, or ever has had, such a voice
As is his, Vachel Lindsay's? Whatever his choice,
Be it singing, exhorting, making fun, prophesying,
It is equally lovely and soul-satisfying.
He's a composite choir, whether shouting or chanting,
Whoever's heard once must admit to a haunting
Nostalgia to hear him again. It's enchanting.
A Sunday-school orator, plus inspiration,
The first ballad-singer, bar none, of the Nation.
When he is performing, I acknowledge to being
More delighted with hearing than I am with seeing.
Perhaps I'm self-conscious, but his postures and poses
Do not strike me as happily chosen for Moses
Bearing down from the mountain his Tables of Stone,
Otherwise the part fits him as though 'twere his own.
When he starts in proclaiming his credo of new laws,
They appear to be vaudeville stunts dashed with blue
 laws.
He's so desperately earnest there's no modifying him,
And that wonderful voice is forever enskying him.
There's a sober old owl and a bright dragon-fly in him,
But clearly there's nothing at all of the dry in him.

An odd, antic fellow, but if you insist
On the unvarnished truth, a sublime egotist
Delighting to cover his titles and fly-leaves
With the personal notes his omnipresent 'I' leaves.
This trait should endear him to every collector
Long after his ego's become a mere spectre.
If his writing's so *chic* that you can't read a particle,
Why, all the more grist for a bibliophile's article.
He's a sort of mad xylophone, twinkling his bells
Before all the doors of the thirty-six Hells.
No whirligig dervish gyrating his piety
Can ever be less moved than he with anxiety
Lest his furious rhythms may show impropriety
And injure his creed in the eyes of society.
He knows his own heart and its innate sobriety
And cares nothing for fools who may note with dubiety
A worship which ranges through so much variety.
A mighty jazz dancer before the Lord! —
I can think of no happier term to record
His effect when reciting. He's astoundingly mystic
Even when he purports to be most naturalistic,
A queer ancient trait we may call Judaistic,
Engraft on a style which is pure Methodistic.
He is always attempting to fathom his soul,
But he cannot get hold of a long enough pole.
As he uses an ancient one which he inherited,
Perhaps, after all, his failure is merited.
It's a battered old thing might be John Wesley's
staff,
Good enough in its day, but too short by half

To reach to his bottom. Still there's something so
stable

In his love for the heirloom, it might pass for a label.
The fellow has scarce an iota of logic
Though he leans rather strongly toward the pedagogic.
These two traits make his teaching less vivid than tak-
ing,

He appears as the herald of some proud awaking,
But what it's to be, I dare swear he's no whit
More enlightened than we are, not one little bit.
I like his conceit of the amaranth apples,
(The word is so charming, the look of it dapples
His page with sunshine) and his modern Valkyri,
A cross between Joan of Arc and a fairy —
I, too, should have relished some good latakia
At a table for two behind clumps of spirea
At the top of his Truth Tower cafeteria
With this twenty-first century wise young Medea.
Who wouldn't, indeed! But the sweepings and shav-
ings

I gather up after her talk seem mere ravings,
The opaline fancies of moonlight and youth.
Among them I scarcely can plot out one truth
Plain enough to be platformed by some voting sleuth
And paraded before the precinct polling-booth.
What's the difference, say I, since the book is as airy
As the dew-dripping song of a young wild canary.
Who dotes on perusing economists' tracts?
There are millions of volumes which deal with mere
facts.

I prefer this spiced basket of rose and camelia,
And a populace dancing a gay seguidilla
Under Tajés Mahal, with the star-chimes all ringing.
(That term, by the way, simply does its own singing.)

'Amaranth apple-trees, sandal-wood thickets!'

Bless the man who has shown us the way through the
 wickets

Which lead to this pleasance, and haply the leaven
Works none the less well because he calls it Heaven.
The book is the whole of him, minus his rhythm.
But the others — how often I pass a day with them,
Boomlaying and shouting, 'creeping through the
 black,'

With a whole troop of nigger-gods yelling at my
 back,

And the motors whizzing with their 'crack-crack-
 crack,'

Till at last I strike the wheat-ridge track

And up along a mulberry lane

I listen to the song of the Rachel-Jane.

And as I listen, perhaps it is absurd,

The singer changes to a small grey bird,

And then I see the purple quiver

Of a rainbow junk on a silver river.

I know that 'Spring comes on forever.'

I know it by heart, I have heard the tale

From Lindsay's jade-grey nightingale.

I shall never forget it, because I know it

By heart. This tribute? Do I not owe it!

Forgive me then, most fanciful poet,

If I find in you rarest, gravest delight
When you would have brought me to Heaven's height.
I am very well off where I am, I think,
Still you certainly write with a golden ink,
But I wish you would give us more of the Chink."

At which juncture, I paused to see if my friend,
Who had not said a word, might have ceased to attend.
Far from it, his eyes were fixed on my face
With an eager insistence as if he would trace
My meaning beyond the mere words. "What you say,"
He broke silence at last in his impassive way,
"Proves your poets to be certainly not of my day.
You put the fact gently, but we are *passé*.
At least that I presume's what you wish to convey."
With a horrified gesture I started to say —
But what? Thank the Lord I had no time to get in
The something I should have wrapt up my regret in,
Like a pill in a sugar-plum, since he went on:
"I should not be surprised, as your judgment anon,
If I heard you correctly, was for Miss Dickinson,
With Whitman and Poe. To throw off constraint,
I will say I consider your pronouncement quaint.
But I'm not so at sea to account for the cause
As before your narration I certainly was.
For the men, I'll admit there is room for dispute;
But the choice of Miss Dickinson I must refute."
Then seeing me shrug, he observed, "I am human,
And hardly can bear to allow that a woman
Is ever quite equal to man in the arts;

The two sexes cannot be ranked counterparts."

"My dear Sir," I exclaimed, "if you'd not been afraid Of Margaret Fuller's success, you'd have stayed Your hand in her case and more justly have rated her."

Here he murmured morosely, "My God, how I hated her!

But have you no women whom you must hate too?
I shall think all the better of you if you do,
And of them, I may add." I assured him, "A few.
But I scarcely think man feels the same contradictory
Desire to love them and shear them of victory?"

"You think wrong, my young friend," he declared
with a frown,

"Man will always love woman and always pull down
What she does." "Well, of course, if you will hug the
cynical,

It is quite your affair, but there is the pinnacle.
She's welcome to climb with man if she wishes."

"And fall with a crash like a trayful of dishes,"

He answered at once, "but if there's no gainsaying her,
There's certainly not the least use in delaying her."

"Very well," I assured him, and quite without mockery,

"But I know several women not yet broken crockery.
Amy Lowell, for instance," I spoke a bit clammily.

"Good Heavens!" he shouted, "not one of the family!
I remember they used to be counted by dozens,
But I never was interested in immature cousins."

"They grow, I believe." The retort was so pat

There was nothing to say, and he pulled down his hat.
I continued: "But since this is not genealogy,
You'll permit me to waive any sort of analogy
Between her and your friend. No one likes to be bound
In a sort of perpetual family pound
Tied by *esprit de corps* to the wheels of the dead.
A poet above all people must have his head.
Indeed it's been whispered the lady sees red
When the subject is broached, she will find her own
latitude."

"My friend, were he here, would extol such an attitude,"

He said very gravely. "But proceed, Sir, I pray."
I hastened as fast as I could to obey:
"Conceive, if you can, an electrical storm
Of a swiftness and fury surpassing the norm;
Conceive that this cyclone has caught up the rainbow
And dashed dizzily on with it streaming in tow.
Imagine a sky all split open and scissored
By lightnings, and then you can picture this blizzard.
That is, if you'll also imagine the clashes
Of tropical thunder, the incessant crashes
Which shiver the hearing and leave it in ashes.
Remember, meanwhile, that the sky is prismatic
And outrageous with colour. The effect is erratic
And jarring to some, but to others ecstatic,
Depending, of course, on the idiosyncratic
Response of beholders. When you come to think of it,
A good deal is demanded by those on the brink of it.
To be caught in the skirts of a whirling afflatus

One must not suppose is experienced gratis.
Broncho-busting with rainbows is scarcely a game
For middle-aged persons inclined to the tame.
Likewise, who'd enjoy a sunrise from the Matter-
horn — something all travellers agree is the attar
Of distilled perfection — must be ready to reap
The mid-afternoon pangs of too little sleep.
I might go on forever commingling my metaphors,
And verse by this means does undoubtedly get a force,
But persons who so air their fancy are bores,
A thing every bone in my body abhors,
And you'll guess by this time, without farther allusion,
That the lady's unique and surprising profusion
Creates in some minds an unhappy confusion.
No one's to be blamed who's not something and twenty,
But it's lucky for her that young folk are so plenty.
The future's her goose and I dare say she'll wing it,
Though the triumph will need her own power to sing it.
Although I'm no prophet, I'll hazard a guess
She'll be rated by time as more rather than less.
Once accustom yourself to her strange elocution,
And milder verse seems by contrast mere dilution.
Then again (for I've kept back a very great part),
Despite her traducers, there's always a heart
Hid away in her poems for the seeking; impassioned,
Beneath silver surfaces cunningly fashioned
To baffle coarse prying, it waits for the touch
Of a man who takes surfaces only as such.
Her work's not, if you will, for the glib amateur,
But I wonder, would it be improved if it were?

Must subtlety always be counted a flaw
And poetry not poetry which puzzles the raw?
Let me turn for an instant to note the reverse
Of my poet, who employs many manners of verse
And when not hurricaning's astoundingly terse;
Yet here the poor creature but makes matters worse.
There are plenty of critics who say they can't hear
When she sings *sotto voce*, the sensation's queer
And inspires a species of horrible fear.
To be told there's a sound and catch nothing at all,
Is a circumstance fairly designed to appal
Most casual people, for here is the hitch:
The admission that one's own ears can't grasp a pitch
Clear and lovely to others. Whereupon a bow-wow
Which swells to a perfectly hideous row.
They've accused her of every description of quackery,
Of only concerning herself with knick-knackery,
It has all been enough to set any one's back awry.
She's a fool to resent it, a man would have grinned?
Quite so, but then poets are created thin-skinned,
And when one is more than a little volcanic,
With a very strong dash of the ultra-tyrannic,
The retort contentious will be simply Titanic.
Behold, then, our poet, by the lash of atrociousness
Goaded into an attitude much like ferociousness.
Every book that she writes has a preface to guard it
Which spits fire and cannon-balls, making each hard
hit
Tell, and mow down its swathe of objectors.
But critics have ever been good resurrectors.

Since she keeps the fight going, they rise to do battle,
When the whole mess is only so much tittle-tattle.
So it goes back and forth with the cries and the cheering,
And there's no sign at all of the atmosphere clearing.
Her books follow each other despite all the riot,
For, oddly enough, there's a queer, crumpled quiet
Perpetually round her, a crazy-quilt tent
Dividing her happily from the event.
Armed to the teeth like an old Samurai,
Juggling with jewels like the ancient genii,
Hung all over with mouse-traps of metres, and cages
Of bright-plumaged rhythms, with pages and pages
Of colours slit-up into streaming confetti
Which give the appearance of something sunsetty,
And gorgeous, and flowing — a curious sight
She makes in her progress, a modern White Knight,
Forever explaining her latest inventions
And assuring herself of all wandering attentions
By pausing at times to sing, in a duly
Appreciative manner, an aria from Lully.
The horse which she rides will suit any part
Either Peg (with the 'asus,') or 'Peg o' my heart.'
To avoid making blunders, he's usually known
Without any suffix as 'Peg' all alone.
This style of address has become a tradition
Most offensively silly, since no erudition
Unaided can ever produce a magician.
For the magic she has, I see nothing demonic
In the use of free verse (the 'free' is quite comic!)
Or even that mule of the arts, polyphonic.

No matter what pedants may find that's awry in him,
There's plenty of kick and plenty of fly in him.

Taking this thing and that, and considering on it,
I believe there are more guesses under her bonnet
Than in any two hats you are likely to meet
(Straw or felt, take your choice, so the shape be discreet,

Not too flap-brimmed and weird, nor too jaunty and neat)

In any particular city or street

You may happen to pick. Note, I only say questions,
Which leaves the mind open to many suggestions,
Up or down, there's the rub. (The mere matter of hats

Is too nice, by the way, to be dealt with as 'Rats!'
There's a temperature here which the best thermostats
Could not regulate better. We're all diplomats
Now the 'Arrys have ousted the aris-tocrats.)"

I looked at my friend, his face was averted.

"You make it quite clear why we are deserted,
Old men are tough customers. Now, as a foil,
Give me something as smooth and slow-running as oil,
Something clear, uncontentious, it even may be
A bit chilly in beauty perhaps." "There's 'H. D.,'"

I was tempted to shout, she fitted so rightly!
His immediate preference: frost falling lightly
In delicate patterns on thin blades of grass.

(Since oil does not fit, I let that figure pass,
Though it did well enough up above where it was.)

"This author's become a species of fable
For she masks her identity under a label.
If others have ancestors, she would forget hers
And appear the spontaneous child of two letters,
The printing of which is the bane of type-setters.
They have called her a dryad just stepped from a bosk,
But I see an ice maiden within an ice kiosk,
With icicle stalactites hanging around her,
And the violets frozen with which they have crowned
her —

The man who would filch them would be an icebounder,
Which I surely am not. If each lovely, veined petal
Becomes by the contact a trifle too brittle
And cold to give out its usual warm scent,
They make it up amply by such dazzlement
Of sun-shot-through-ice that the shine of her shrine
Seems the sky-piercing glitter of some Apennine.
I have told you before that my mind teems with sim-
iles.

It's a shocking bad habit persists in some families,
I've an uncle — but there, I spread out like a runnel,
When I should flow as straight as though poured
through a funnel.

So take this digression in the light of an interlude
Leading up to a change which I wish to obtrude
On the form of my speech, for I find I am freezing
Before the remarkably chilly, though pleasing,
Ice image I've painted, and soon shall be sneezing.
My Muse must immediately seek out a clime
Where her trippings and flittings are not above rime,

Or dew that is duly congealed, or hoar-frost.
I'm indifferent to science, so the meaning be tossed
Into some sort of shape which fits well with my
 pattern,
For, whatever the faults of said Muse, she's no slattern.
My verse, I'll allow, is the species fantastic,
I've been *épris* for years of the style Hudibrastic,
But my rhyming morale is, I trust, inelastic.
Which preamble means I have searched for a week
To rouse neither my Muse's nor heroine's pique
In the matter of climate. I've found it in Greek.
'H. D.' (for it's time we got back to the girl)
Might be some ancient mirror, with mother-of-pearl
Let into its metal, a thing which a nation
Deems well worth the cost of its own exhumation,
A prize to count up to the whole excavation.
This mirror, which carries the breath of the past
On its scarcely stained surface, is no scholiast,
But a living replica of what once was living
At the touch of a rare adoration reviving.
Here youths in scant armour, on the way to the
 galleys,
Woo maidens in dark ilex-groves; in the valleys,
Anemone-sprinkled, young shepherds guard flocks
Clad in ram's fleeces only; above the sharp rocks
Jutting into the purple Ionian sea
Are the white, fluted columns of — Fiddle-de-dee!
Such lyrical bursts in a mere *jeu d'esprit*
Are like brandy poured into a cup of bohea,
A transaction called 'lacing' in old days, *on dit*.

I can't say for myself, being no devotee
Of either diluted or straight *eau-de-vie*,
And the eighteenth amendment is nothing to me.
Still, I don't like a law couched in hyperbole,
It gets any one's goat. To return to 'H. D.,'
Whom I've really kept waiting most outrageously,
She's the thing as it was, not the thing we have made it
And with insolent ornament quite overlaid it.
She descends to no commonplace, flock-guarding shepherds.

No pompous Victorian gush ever jeopardises
Her reticent, finely-drawn line. No Greek marble
Has less of the pueril and less of the garble.
Her sea is the sea of a child or a Neriad,
And yet no false word lifts it out of its period.
Her flowers of shore and of cliff those we seek
On our cliffs and our shores, but hers somehow are
Greek.

Her poems are excitement and rest, and the glory
Of living a life and not reading a story.
Archæology? Yes, in the very same way
That geology's the mountain we climb every day.
The armour she welds, the dyed cloth she weaves,
Are so perfect in artistry, every word cleaves
To the substance as though that would crackle without
it

And split. Read her books (there are two) if you
doubt it.

Perhaps, after all, this quintessence of Greece
Is the wool on a century-garlanded fleece;

Underneath is, and was, a tough fibre of leather.
 Is the Greece she has given us Greece altogether?
 As well might one ask if the youth of Praxiteles
 Is an everyday chap or a scheme to belittle ease
 By exalting the sharp line of young masculinity.
 In her method and his is there not some affinity?
 Each sheers to the soul, to the base of a nemesis,
 And the hard, glancing residue is the ultimate genesis.
 For out of the past is the future; a truism,
 You must pardon, since man has invented no new
 'ism'

Since the days of the cavemen. I wish merely to
 prove

That this most modern poet runs along an old groove,
 That the erudite novelties filling her pages
 Are as old as this morning and as new as the ages."

Here a voice interrupted my long peroration,
 Speaking, I detected, in some irritation.

"I think," it announced, "though I may be mistaken,
 There's a poet whom you've not mentioned yet, Con-
 rad Aiken."

Such an ill-governed mind as I've got, and the porter
 Never keeps out intruders who call, as he ought to.

(That rhyme will be cursed as "a regular snorter"

By every stand-pat, Tennysonian supporter.

I am sorry myself to be forced to distort a

Fine line unduly, and if I or my thought err

I am willing to own it without the least *hauteur*.

I rhyme as I can, and am never a courter

For all suffrages.) The doorman, I said,
Who, between you and me, is a crass dunderhead,
Had let this extremely irascible gentleman
Pass through the door, and of course he began
At once to upbraid me. It's the method he uses
To force himself into the sight of the Muses.
"Young man," I replied with some heat, "you mistake
My preoccupation. If you wish to make
Your entrance at once with the ladies, I'll see to it,
But I should have supposed you'd immediately veto
it."

This was rather a staggerer, to be grouped with the
women

Would tax the endurance of any male human;
Yet to wait any longer, when I might be weary
Before his turn came, did not strike him as cheery.
He puffed and he fumed, with pride pulling both
ways;

It was pitiable to see the poor fellow's malaise.
But finally, with a great bluffing of chivalry,
He declared he had no sort of feeling of rivalry
Against the fair sex who adorned his profession.
A very neat way, this, to blur a confession,
For the long and the short of it was he'd go on
The carpet at once, if I pleased. Thereupon
I hastily made my excuses to one
Or two ladies I'd meant to have been next presented.
Being sensible persons, they seemed quite contented.
Perhaps 'twas as well, for I'd rather a hunch
The irascible poet might make good with his "Punch"

And land me that terrible "one on the jaw,"
When I'm sure I should "measure my length" in the
straw.

It will clearly be seen that my anxious perusal
Of a recent combat has done much to bamboozle
The erstwhile classic grace of my natural diction.
You see I obeyed a strong predilection
In Carpentier's favour to the tune of a tenner
And, with other good sportsmen, I found my Gehenna.
"Mr. Aiken's a poet so cram full of knowledge
He knows all about poetry that's taught in a college.
His versification's as neat as a pin,
His metre so fine it becomes finikin.

I say nothing of rhythm, for he's something fanatical
Anent the advantage of the beat mathematical.
Within his set limits, the pulse of his verse
Is often most subtle, and even his worse
Attempts are by no means either jejune or lacking
In form, one can hardly imagine him slacking
In pains or desire. He's all that a poet
Can make of himself when he sets out to do it
With his heart, and his soul, and his strength, and his
mind.

For years now, he's had a most horrible grind
With his work, with the public, but what stands in his
way

Is the awkward necessity of something to say.
A man of sensations, of difficult cheerfulness
Which the fog in his brain has tormented to fearful-
ness,

Possessed of much music and little idea,
Always steeping his soul in the strange undersphere
Of the brain. Since all thought in him tends to grow
hazy

When his sentiment's roused, he is lost in a mazy
Vortex where he swings like some pale asteroid.
Seeking orientation, he's stumbled on Freud.
With the Austrian's assistance, he's become neurologi-
cal,

A terrible fate to befall the illogical.
Being born with an ultra-sensitive cuticle,
We must realize his verse in a sense therapeutical.
If he doesn't quite state any fact, his oblique
Side-glances at subjects are just hide-and-seek
He's playing with all his frustrated ambitions
And gaining, thereby, some vicarious fruitions.
He's so young as to think that he proves his maturity
By boldly colliding with all sorts of impurity.
His ladies are, most of them, a little bit dusty,
But we're learning to think any other kind musty.
The true modern artist would face destitution
Were it not for that universe-wide institution
Plain people frown down on and call prostitution.
No matter how shopworn the plots he has made,
They will always pass muster if he mentions a spade.
At least this is true with that type of Bohemia
Which is not yet aware that such art spells anæmia.
Not so Aiken — his brothels, street-walkers, dope-
eaters
Are merely the web he weaves over with metres.

He uses them chiefly because they are easy
And sure to produce an effect on the queasy.
For more than all else he dreads falling flat;
The fear of it teases his brain like a gnat.
He would rather be called wicked, incomprehensible,
Anything, so long as the world's not insensible.
In his anxious desire to escape being tepid,
He makes too great a show of the over-intrepid,
But his real interest lies in quite other directions:
In noting the faintest of fleeting reflections
In tone or in colour; in catching the magic
Of words against words; and it simply is tragic
How few apprehend his remarkable quality.
But was ever a public more lost in frivolity
Than ours? It cannot tell feathers from lead
Till you hit it a crack with the last on the head.
His volumes are filled with a sea-green miasma
Shot and sprinkled throughout with the grotesque
phantasma
Of an egoist's brain, or a man's when he's sleepy.
They revolve unrelated and sink into creepy
Sight and sound mutterings, yet sometimes so vivid
They are that they seem to stand out in a livid
And flaming protrusion. Take, for instance, the scene
Of his satyrs and mænads, which is white striped on
green,
With red, sudden explosions. Sometimes, more sur-
prising,
The fog lifts a moment before a sun rising
As clear and as thin as though painted on china

By some eighteenth century Dresden designer.
His sordid back rooms disappear and the groans
Of dying dope-fiends, and we hear 'three clear tones,'
The tones of his bird in the china-berry tree.
What a mercy that such a tree happened to be!
Otherwise, I believe, he must have invented it.
Never mind, here it is, and he's simply cemented it
On the botany of poetry for ever and ever.
I say that superbly, without the least quiver.
If the rest of his work's neither Saint Paul's nor Krem-
len,
He's built a basilica surely in 'Senlin.' -
At least in that 'Morning Song,' which, until lately,
Was the sole, single fragment he'd done adequately.
Till 'Punch,' ah! with 'Punch' now, he should achieve
fame,
But there's nothing so dogging as a once-come-by
name.
If this were his first, he'd be up like a rocket,
Now I think he'll burn steadily on in his socket
Making beautiful poems though the public won't
stand 'em
Because he can't drive style and tale in a tandem.
Since the books as they are stick so hard in the gizzard,
The sensible thing is to have each one scissored.
Cut out from each volume the one or two scraps
You might like on a third or fourth reading perhaps;
Paste them into a scrap-book, and some rainy day
Just glance over the lot and I think you will say:
'By Jove! What a fellow he is in his way!'

And I'll thank you for that as a true leaf of bay.
If he, the arch-sceptic, finds other folk doubting,
He makes a mistake to be seen always pouting.
He has not his deserts, yet to publish the fact
Is a childish and most unintelligent act,
But every one knows he's deficient in tact.
A man who can work with such utter devotion
Can afford to wait patiently for his promotion,
And that it will come, I've a very strong notion.
One thing we can say, he will certainly wait
And either get in or turn dust at the gate.
Since Fame is a very good hand at the shears,
I shall not be surprised if he gets his arrears,
For quality counts in the long run of years."
I turned to the shade in my mind, but unused
To listening with patience, the thing had vamoosed.

Not so my old friend, he was listening intensely,
And as I stopped speaking, he said, "I'm immensely
Intrigued by that man, he's a curious fellow.
Too bad he's permitted himself to see yellow.
A jaundiced perspective's a great handicap.
Well, what other poets have you got in your lap?
I commend you, young man, as an excellent etcher."
"The next I shall notice will be John Gould Fletcher,"
I answered, "but before I begin my narration
Don't *think*; if you can, *see* an irradiation
Spreading out over roofs, over trees, over sky,
The gold screen of a moment, on which you descry
Such oddments as heaps of 'vermilion pavilions'

And Gabriel's angels all riding on pillions
On the backs of cloud horses, blowing trumpets of
thunder,

Above forests of elephant trees standing under
The precipitous cone of some steep afternoon.
The whirling wind 'screams,' the stars 'shrill,' the
streets croon.

A cataract of music swirls out of the throats
Of the long scarlet trumpets, the prismatic notes
Sweep over the city like sun-spray and laughter,
Embroidered with all colours . . . Then what comes
after?

More colours, a rain of them, hanging, delaying,
To sprinkle cool 'jade balustrades' with their staying.
Golden flakes, silver filaments, what pandemonium!
The rainbow joined in wedlock to a bursting harmo-
nium.

Elephantine surrenders, prodigious relapses,
Speech turned to a fire-ball which soars and collapses
And spills down its words like the whole spectrum fall-
ing .

In a broken excitement: My eye, it's appalling!
Such a chaotic shooting and drifting of particles,
Mere loveliness solus, not stuck tight to articles,
For what it all means does not matter a jot;
You are filled with delight at it, or you are not.
But suppose that you weary of the polychromatic —
Some natures, I realize, are far too lymphatic
To derive any pleasure from what is not static —
There are corners to rest in with fountains, and grass

Streaming up in long slopes, and if you should pass
Just over the hill, there's a house where each column
Is wreathed and entangled with the half-gay, half-
solemn

Recollections of childhood. There you can eat lunch-
eon,

And drink slow well-water from some old grey punch-
eon,

And listen to tales of hobgoblins and genie
Till I venture to say you'll be a bit spleeny
And welcome the rising of white-faced Selene.

(Rather pretty, that last, such touches do garnish
One's writing, I think, and I'm not above varnish.

I like a bright lustre in poems or medallions,
The polish one sees in the later Italians.

Here a friend who's dropped in says I've mixed my
mythology.

Such a slip, if I've made it, deserves an apology:

Selene, Cybele, Diana — I care

Not at all for mere names. You may take Lemprière
And choose any Goddess you think opportune
So you quite understand I refer to the moon.)

As you sit in the moonlight, the gist of your sum-
mary

Will be: Here at last, is a poet without flummery.

A score or two words are his total of plunder,

But the whole is a boyhood imprisoned in wonder.

A boy, and the things all about him — plain stuff,
And not even new, but the measure's enough.

Not the kind which they want for a penny-a-liner;

It's too sharp, and too sheer, but for that all the
finer.

Have you ever gone into a dim, disused attic
And poked about there among the erratic
Remains of worn toys, legless soldiers, chipped blocks,
And suddenly come on an old music-box?
As you twist round the handle, the notes seem to
squeeze

Through the dust, some are lost and the rest choke and
wheeze,

But you make out a tune, and the mere broken hint
of it

Is the agonized joy of remembrance, by dint of it
You suffer and love with an ache you'd forgotten.
It were wiser, perhaps, were your ears stuffed with cot-
ton.

So Fletcher's not only the rainbow in spate,
He's the soul of a music-box which can create
All our childhood again. If the tune's a bit scrappy,
What's the odds, just so long as the sound makes us
happy?

So far, Mr. Fletcher, for that's only a mood,
We'll not whistle until we are out of the wood.
Were your publishers mad, or why bind together
Your 'Old House' and 'Symphonies'? One wonders
whether

You were bent on emptying out your portfolio.
You created, at any rate, quite an imbroglio.
This break-up of feeling with one or two vile hacks
Of discord is as jarring as gumdrops and smilax

Giving suddenly place to red-peppers and asters.
The symphonies, come on this way, call for plasters.
This arrangement, indeed, was the worst of disasters.
Up bright in the morning, shoes tied and hair brushed,
On a Sunday, maybe, when you're not too much
rushed,

You can seek ancient China in Symphony Blue;
Or, if you prefer, you may take a stroll through
Any Spring, in the Green; you may sail over oceans
With the Red glare of stoke-holes to thrill your emo-
tions;

You may fight in the Scarlet, and laugh in the Yel-
low,

You may do what you please in the Gold. A fine fel-
low

Whose palette is full if a little bit messy.
But you have a good deal of the world here *in esse*.
At least, you would have, were it not for a doubt
About what any symphony's really about.
He writes, it appears, in a prismatic spasm;
This phase of his work is complete protoplasm.
He is whirling his atoms before quite cohering them,
But there's no doubt at all that he soon will be steering
them.

Yet, hold on a bit, my dear chap, do you think
You can set all America down in cold ink?
Here you are, aeroplaning from Boston to Texas,
And taking snapshots as you fly to perplex us.
If you see a sky-scraper, down it goes, and the next
Shot's a square of Chicago — fit it into the text.

Joggle niggers and Mexicans, some of them dead
'uns,

And for spirit, bring in a few battles where reddens
The smoke of proud guns, for your richest of gravies
Is the sauce of Bull Run and the bier of Jeff Davis.
You've done it, my cock, as well as a man
Who is chiefly the slave of his sensations can;
For somehow your genius has a habit of shying
Whenever your heart is involved. It's most trying.
You can work yourself up to a towering passion
Over landscapes and peoples, but when you would
fashion

A love lyric — Puff! and the substance dissolves
And melts out of your fingers. A thousand resolves
To break through with yourself, to have done with ob-
jectives,

Leave you still where you were, exploring perspectives.
I declare I could weep, did I not know that life
Is only achieved through a vast deal of strife.
You stand in the midst of a cosmic heterogeny,
But I do not despair of your rearing a progeny.
If chaos at last jelled into a man,
What a big chaos did, your small chaos can.
You were built, you perceive, as the first of your
clan.

And, whatever you want, you've got what no other
Poet ever has had. So a truce to the pother!
Bless the man, you've done something as new as to-
morrow,

And I cannot consider your case with much sorrow.

Just wait"... But, most gently, my old friend interrupted,

"Don't go on, Sir, I beg, I am being corrupted.
Your poets are so diverse. One thing I can say,
Good or bad, they're more various than poets were in
my day.

If you've more in your bag, produce them, I pray."

Thus adjured, I remembered the one or two ladies
I'd deserted, and mentally crying "Oh, Hades!
Will they be mad as hops or affect a quite staid ease?
Whichever it is, I shall get a good wiggling,
To be kept waiting's always a bit *infra* digging.
I must cudgel my brain for a really apt whopper,
Women don't pardon blunders when their *amour*
propre

Is in question." But all of the chickens I'd counted,
When I'd tallied them up to a total, amounted
To just nothing at all, for your modern Egeria
Is far too advanced to give way to hysteria.
Approaching the first, I said no woman like her
Had yet been considered. She replied "Oh, you piker!
A poet learns to see, and you need not dissemble.
We will go up at once. Grace, here is your thimble."
Then jumping up quickly from where she was sitting
She quite overturned a little girl's knitting
Who was there by some chance, I'll come back to that
later.

Said I to myself, no man living can hate her,
She is what I should call a born fascinator.

Upon reaching my friend — and let me explain
That these scenes in the scene all take place in my
brain —

I began with a few neatly turned words on love
As the poet's own bourne, and declared that no glove
Ever fitted a hand with less wrinkling and snugger
Than this theme this poet. Here I noticed her shrug
her

Shoulders a little, which was rather upsetting.

However, it may have been only coquetting.

Still I thought it was wise to get on with my tale:

"Our love-poet, *par excellence*, Sara Teasdale,"

I said with a flourish. Now that was a whale

Of a compliment, such things deserve an entail,

'Twas so brilliantly super even if it were true,

And I knew very well 'twas but one of a cue.

"This poet," I went on, "is a great niece of Sapho,

I know not how many 'greats' laid in a row

There should be, but her pedigree's perfectly clear;

You can read it in 'Magazine Verse' for the year.

She is also a cousin, a few times removed,

Of dear Mrs. Browning, that last can be proved.

The elder poet hid in a shrouding mantilla

Which she called Portuguese. Was ever trick sillier?

Our Sara is bolder, and feels quite at ease

As herself; in her mind there is nothing to tease.

Dale and valley, the country is hers she traverses,

She has mapped it all out in a bushel of verses.

Sara Teasdale she is — was — for our minnesinger,

Behind her front door, is now Mrs. Filsinger.

A hard question this, for a hand-maid of Muses,
When she's once made a name in cold print which she
loses

On taking a husband, the law's masculinity
Would seem to demand a perpetual virginity
For all married poets of the down-trodden sex.
To forfeit the sale of a new volume checks
Even marital ardour, to say nothing of cheques.
It's just this sort of thing which so frequently wrecks
The artistic composure, and must surely perplex
Any husband who's not in the class of henpecks.
Still I think the poor man should find some consolation

In two or three volumes of sheer adoration.
It's the price he receives for never imposing
Himself on his wife when the lady's composing.
Under whatever name, the world grows awarer
Every year of the prize we have got here in Sara.
She has no colours, no trumpets, no platforms, no
scepticisms,
She has no taste for experiments, and joins in no
schisms;

She just sings like a bird, and I think you'll agree
This is clearly the place for the china-berry tree —
With a difference, the bird in that pleasant, arboreal
Importation had three tones, while her repertorial
Range is compassed in one, the reflex amatorial.
She loves in a charming, perpetual way,
As though it just came when she was distraight,
Or quite occupied in affairs of the day.

Or else, and I think the remark's more acute,
She lives as the flower above a deep root.
Like a dedicate nun, she tells bead after bead
At Matins, Tierce, Vespers. You'd think she'd be treed
Just once in a while to find something to say.
Not at all, she's a vast *catalogue raisonnée*
Of the subject. No one's so completely *au fait*.
Her poetry succeeds, in spite of fragility,
Because of her very remarkable agility.
There is no single stunt in the style amatory
Which is not included in her category,
We may as well take that at once *a priori*.
So easy to her seems the work of creation
She might be just jotting down lines from dictation.
There is nothing green here, each poem's of the ripest.
The income tax lists her as Cupid's own typist.
Of course, it is true that she's not intellectual,
But those poets who are, are so apt to subject you all
To theories and treatises, the whole galvanometry
Of the bardling who thinks verse a sort of geometry.
Now Sara's as easy to read as a slip
On a piece of banana, and there's no need to skip,
For each poem's so peculiarly like every other
You may as well stay where you are and not bother.
She's that very rare compost, the dainty erotic;
Such a mixture can't fail to produce a hypnotic
Effect on the reader, whose keenest sensation
Will consist in a perfect identification
Of himself with the poet, and her sorrows and joys
Become his, while he swings to the delicate poise

Of a primitive passion so nicely refined
It could not bring a blush to the most squeamish
mind.

Though the poems, I may add, are all interlined
For the ready perusal of those not too blind.
For Sara, if singer, is also a woman,
I know of no creature more thoroughly human.
If woman, she's also a lady who realizes
That a hidden surprise is the best of surprises.
She seems a white statue awaiting unveiling,
But raised on a platform behind a stout railing
Whence she lures and retires, provoking a nearer
Contact which is promised to be even dearer
If we find we have courage enough not to fear her."
I looked at my subject to find she'd departed,
It's a habit of hers when a party's once started
To vanish unnoticed. My poetess had flown.
Seeing which, I remarked that I'd better postpone
The rest of my discourse. "I think you have shown
The outlines at least, my young cicerone,"
Said my friend. "Have you others? I see the sun's setting.

If you have many more, why we must be getting
On faster." I promised to use all despatch
Which I saw was most needed when I took out my
watch.

"There's a child here I've not yet had leisure to mention,
Both she and her mother are worth your attention.

And one or two more I can think of, but most of them
Will not take up much time. After that, there's a host
of them

We'll consider, if you are agreeable, *en masse*."

"You spoke of a child, a child in this class!"

He asked me astonished. "I suppose that betrays
me

A fogey indeed, but the thing does amaze me."

"No wonder," I answered, "America's youth
Symbolized with a vengeance as plainest of truth.

The poets I've presented may none of them be

Among the top boughs of that flourishing tree,

The *Genus Poeticus, Anglice-folia*,

Whose flowers have rivalled the greater magnolia,

But no shoot we know of has blossomed so early

As ours, and that makes a distinction clearly.

A ten-year-old child, half elf and half sage,

Where else can you find a poet of her age?

This is no little girl, though the critics preëempt her

As the essence of childhood, but, *caveat emptor*;

It is easy to say, which is all that they care about,

For where is the critic one can see is aware about

Any essence whatever. This child's no more childhood

Than the wolf was the grandmother for donning her
mild hood.

Hilda Conkling (I see I've forgotten to name her)

Is a greater phenomenon than they would proclaim
her.

She is poetry itself, for her slight little soul

Is not yet of a size to encompass the whole

She gives out. Without knowing who really is speaking,
She speaks, and her words fall without the least seeking.

There's no need for allowances, the poems that she
writes

May be certainly reckoned among the high lights
Of their *genre*, and although I'm no hyperbolist
I say flatly this child is the first Imagist.

But you will remember that Jove sometimes naps,
And the baby in Hilda not seldom entraps

The genius. But what of that! Such handicaps
May be reckoned as *nil* in the total, perhaps.

If she sometimes descends from Parnassus crescendo
To play with her dolls, why, the greatest of men do
The same in their fashion, and no innuendo
Need follow so natural a way of proceeding.

It is merely the little girl in her stampeding.

Since she's neither a freak, nor a ghoul, nor a
Houyhnhnm,

We may thank the good fate which has left her a
minim

Of usual childhood — but, bless my soul, what
Has become of her now, she was here, was she not?"

"Oh," her mother joined in, "she ran off to catch
A white kitten she saw. There's no fear of a scratch,
She understands kittens." "Did she hear what I'm
saying?"

I asked. "I am really afraid she was paying
But little attention, her fingers were drumming
In time to some sort of a tune she was humming.

Now she and the kitten are disposed to agree,
We have lost her, I fear, so you'll have to take me."

Now what can a gallant gentleman do
On receiving a challenge so couched? "*Entre nous*,
I think you're delightful," I said in aside,
"Your verses have made many poets emerald-eyed.
What you seem to do without turning a hair
Is just the one trick makes the less gifted swear.
Who would copy you, digs for himself a fine snare."
But when a man whispers inside of his mind
He can scarcely expect an onlooker to find
His abstraction amusing. My friend woke me smartly
From my silent flirtation by announcing, quite tartly,
"The child, as you've proved, is a *lusus naturæ*,
A verdict I'm sure any qualified jury
Would agree to at once were her case up for trial.
Why even our feminophobe on the 'Dial'
Never dared to bring forward young ladies of ten
As serious rivals to middle-aged men.
Poor Margaret Fuller, how she would have doted on
Your remarkable age, and how happily floated on
Its dawn-coloured currents and all its forensical
Preoccupations! We were so common-sensical.
Perhaps we were tainted with some sentimentalism,
But your *beau idéal* seems to be elementalism.
I can cap you, however, by mentioning one
Poet who never grew up, your friend, Miss Dickinson."

"The comparison's just," I declared. "As to Hilda,

Your juxtaposition need never bewilder
The admirers of either. One you failed quite to scotch;
The other, I think, you should certainly watch."

"Well, well," he said hastily, "but I protest
At sitting all night with you and your quest.
Who's the next, and be quick." As if riding a race
I dashed at my subject: "Let me introduce Grace
Conkling, no one is so handy at brooks,
They chatter and spatter through all of her books.
And her fish — every angler is on tenterhooks
Lest they should escape him. The same with her birds.
My land, what a fluttering they make! Quite two
 thirds

Of her work is concerned with them, so that her
pages

Present the appearance of so many cages.
Then mountains — yes, mountains — she crams them
in too.

The little nearby ones all green, and all blue
The more distant peaks. She is great on perspective.
And whatever her theme, she is always selective.
Take her love-poems, for instance, she serves, piping
hot,

A lyric of passion, and chooses the spot
For its setting somewhere where you go in a yacht:
South America, Mexico, wherever not,
So there is a garden with grapefruit, kumquat,
A score or two peach-trees and some apricot.
For her flowers, one should be an encyclopedia.
No less an abundance of knowledge the medea

Could possibly be to surmount and recount 'em.
(Here I've got in a mess. There's no rhyme except
'fount.' Hem!

Take no notice I beg of the exceedingly thin ice
I'm skating on; if you find my heroine nice,
Which she certainly must be to all masculine eyes,
I care not a whit with what names I am twitted.
(On account of my subject, the claim's manumitted.)
Now turn back six lines, so you capture the gist
Of my tale where I left it — I will jot down a list
Of a few of her flowers which must not be missed.
There's magnolia first, of the kind grandiflora,
With its moons of blooms scenting the air where
Señora

Jimenez, Alcaro — take your pick, I would banish
Such names if I could, but the Señora's Spanish —
Walks under daturas whose cups of perfume
Hang above her, with jasmine so thick there's scant
room

To pass down the path to the beds where the lilies
Are standing together in a stately and still ease.
The dates are in blossom, or is it in fruit? —
One should not make a list unless able to do't,
And this Mexican flora trips any one's foot —
Never mind, it's enough that the lady's en route
To a clandestine tryst, when a tingling *sol fa*
Shakes the garden to life, for he's brought his guitar.
I acknowledge I've taken a few autocratic
Liberties with my author, who's never dramatic,
But the garden alone seemed to me miasmatic,

With its scents and its sounds, but for the rest solus.
If we must not embroider, why she must parole us.
Since I've given no promise, and the scene, without
doubt,

Should have been there although the poet left it out,
It shall stand in my version — and there's a night-
piece.

But what of the mornings, as soft as *crêpe-lisse*
Till the mists burn away with the sun and leave
staring

A peacock-hued dome, with gilt cornices, flaring
Above an old market-place crowded with fig-trees
And the flame-coloured awnings of booths where the
big trees

Make a thunder-cloud shade, and Giuseppe, Felice,
(These Mexican names make our own sound so
screechy!)

Are vociferously selling figs, melons, and grapes?
It's the rainbow gone mad in all colours and shapes.
There are smoky blue plums and raw-striped cucum-
bers,

Red slits of pomegranates, gold loquats, the umbers
Of nuts and the green of almonds not yet husked;
Huge elephant baskets of flowers all betusked
With long sprays of yucca — the poet has attacked
us

With all of her armoury at once — spears of cactus
Shoot out between passion-vines spreading their dis-
cus-

Like blooms just above a bouquet of hibiscus.

The trees, I observe, are all festooned with monkeys,
Long necklaces of them, and the square's choked with
donkeys.

The bell in the peacock dome clatters and clangs,
Parakeets flash through leaves like so many whiz-bangs
On the fourth of July, there are orchids exploding
New flowers each minute over hand-carts unloading
Bread-fruit and bananas, and the hot, dry sirocco
Tips it all to a sparkle so bright and rococo
The book should be bound in a purple morocco
If the contents and cover were made to agree,
This dismal sage-green is a catastrophe;
But what publisher thinks of aught else but his fee.¹
I have written my best, but it's so multiplex I can
Never compete with her when she's on Mexican
Horticulture, zoölogy, and I don't know what all,
Unless I've Gray's 'Botany' handy, and Nuttall,
With Wilson and Chapman close by on the table;
And as to the speech, it is just so much Babel
To me if each word is not tagged with a label
In good easy English. Well, no matter for that,
I've told you she's got every atmosphere pat.
She's as happy with pine-trees and an orchard of ap-
ples
And the clouds which a 'slender sky' scatters and dap-
ples
Over grass-and-stone hillsides, as with lotus-brimmed
fountains,
And I'll swear that no poet has done better with moun-
tains.

Her flickers, and veeries, and finches, and thrushes
Are as good as her nightingale hid in a bush is,
And when she would sing of the Old Mohawk Trail
I toss up my hat with a shout of 'All hail!
Troubadour of New England, who knows that white
 pine is
Her very soul's self,' and I write in gold, 'Finis!'"

"Dear me," said my friend, "so you think she's the
 laureate
Of poor old New England." "If there's any one bore
 I hate
More than another," I answered, "it's the man
Who pretends to see farther than any one can.
Considering we've Robinson, Miss Lowell, and Frost
Such a statement were rash. I'm afraid you have
 lost
Just the shade I intended; there's a difference, be
 sure,
Between a poet laureate and a troubadour."
"The point is well taken," he admitted at once.
"Was I laureate or troubadour? The distinction con-
 fronts
Me now rather unpleasantly. For, was I able
To go her one better in my famous 'Fable'?
That I loved my New England you'll find by the space
I devoted to her in that book. Face to face
With her new poets, I'm wondering who'll win in the
 race.
Am I in the lead since they've quickened the pace?

I'm beginning to doubt it as far as mere praise
Counts at least, I was Frost and she mixed, hence my
bays,

If I really deserved any. But with this poetess
I find myself back on old ground, none the less.
Delightful, be sure, and there is a slight change
In her manner, I do detect that, but her range
Does not carry me out of the depth of my sympathy."
"The next fellow will," was my succinct reply.

"Alfred Kreymborg, deft master of the oddest machine
Made of strings and of gut which I ever have seen.

A hybrid of sorts yclept mandolute;

Queer instrument? Very. His voice is the flute
Playing over the strings, and his songs epigrams
Tinkled up into rhythm. Oh, yes, they're called
shams

By the public at large, but who wants a large public?
Kreymborg's manner to his is a kiss and a kick.

He's the monkey of poetry who climbs on a stick,
But that's only his way to conceal by a trick

The real truth he has. Oh, he's impolitic

To a fault, but the fellow is no lunatic,

Nor mountebank either, though some people think

He has squeezed not two drops of his blood in his ink

And regard him as jester with more than suspicion.

The fact is he's an untaught, but natural musician.

His poems and his tunes come straight out of his pestle

And fall as they will. Unbaked clay's not a vessel,

However, and though I believe he has made

Some excellent poems, that's not really his trade,

Which I grieve to admit consists largely of bluffing.
The gems in his books are half smothered in stuffing.
He's an ironist pure, but I can't call him simple;
More than one of his efforts may be classed as a pimple
On the fair face of poetry, but others delight us
As much for their beauty as the first kind affright us
By their horrible ugliness, wry-formed and waxy.
He's a man flinging queer little toys from a taxi.
If you scrabble round fast enough you may pick a good
one,

But the chances are ten to one you'll get a wooden
Contraption of rude, creaky springs, badly gilt,
Just words nailed together haphazard, no lilt,
And no sense you can find. It's a real 'hunt the slip-
per'

To read what he writes, and you may come a tripper
Or you may win a prize, that's the whole proposition.
How does it affect his poetic position?

I tell you quite frankly I feel at a loss

For an answer to give you, we might try a toss

Or leave it in peace on the lap of the Gods.

To put it quite plainly, dear Sir, what's the odds?

When we come to his singing, it's another concern.

However on earth did the chap come to learn

Of those strange sweeping chords and that odd whis-
pered singing

Which cleaves to the heart and sets the nerves sting-
ing,

And where did he find his sawed-off mandolin

Or guitar, or banjo? Good Lord, it's a sin

When there is such an instrument no one else knows
it,

But the luckier for him, I say, and therefore — *prosit!*
The poems he writes down never end, scarce begin,
If the truth must be told; in the music, a thin
Silver chord holds a something, a glitter of fable,
And the tale and its moral lie strung on a cable,
Half-music, half-thought, but what we have heard
Is more echo than music, more music than word.
He's a poet in the core of him, a bit of a clown,
And two-thirds of a vagabond drifting round town,
Seeing whimsical nothings at every street corner.
A lover possessed, an inveterate scorner,
Engaged in a pulling of plums like Jack Horner —
There's the man, Alfred Kreymborg." "We had no
counterpart

To your monkey-musician. Do you call the thing art
You've been talking about?" The old gentleman's
tone

Betrayed just a trace of annoyance. "I've shown
You a figure, make of him whatever you can,
To tag him as this or that's not in my plan.
You asked me to give you each phase of the time."
"And I could not stand Whitman because he'd no
rhyme!"

He gasped. "You may banish all verse that's har-
monious,

But it's not so far short of being felonious
When you ask us to substitute for it the simious.
You will find what that means in the pages of Linnæus.

We raised roses, but you seem to cultivate zinnias,
Not to call your verse anything more ignominious."

"You forget," I reminded him, "his mandolute;
To judge him without it is hardly acute."

The old gentleman suddenly turned and snapped
"Nonsense!"

"On the contrary, Sir, it's the *sine quâ non* sense.

We have Lindsay, a voice; and Kreamborg, an instrument."

"Is your poetry a junk-shop? I am now quite convinced you meant

All this as hoaxing." I tried to protest.

He went on in a stream like a person possessed:

"A junk-shop indeed! There is Frost, a dim Buddha
Set high on a shelf; there is Sandburg, a cruder
Carved god of some sort, neither English nor Gothic —
Assyrian, Egyptian, perhaps — a huge Thothic
Sacerdotal presentment placed over the door;
There are two Chinese vases, a spy-glass, three score
Or so dog's-eared books, flower-pots, and a spinet,
This odd jumble's Miss Lowell; there's a little green
linnet

Hung up in a cage, Sara Teasdale, I think;
And a battered old desk all bespattered with ink,
That's Masters; and just up above is a palette
Smudged over with paint, that is Fletcher; a mallet
Thrown down on a heap of new books which it crushes
Is Aiken; and there is a bundle of rushes
Just picked and brought in to the shop to set off
A stone-lantern — 'H.D.'; just behind is a trough

To water poor readers, it's not overflowing
But full to the brim and seems always just going
To spill, but that never quite happens, you guess
At once this is Robinson; in a recess
Just under the counter are two or three chromos
Of tropical scenes, Mrs. Conkling is those;
And the blocks which you see have just come from the
 gilder

I need hardly tell you are your precious Hilda,
They are specially made to build Castles in Spain.
There's your junk-shop of poets, and I tell you again
I don't like to be quizzed." Poor old soul, he was fu-
 rious,

But when once convinced his suspicions were spurious
He was eager as ever. "For," said I, "there's no quar-
 rel.

The shop sign's a wreath and it's possibly laurel."
"Perhaps I have half a suspicion of that
Myself," he smiled broadly, "now give tit for tat,
And confound all my quondam ridiculous ires
With something so pleasant and . . ."

 "The Untermeyers!"

The shout which I gave cut his sentence in two,
And we lost the last part in the hullabaloo
I made as I served up my marital dish.
"Two poets, and between them whatever you wish.
If they haven't the depth, they've more range than the
 Brownings,
It runs all the way from complexes to clownings,

With love-songs so frank they pursue more than follow
man

Being made on the pattern approved by King Solomon.
man.

(My so spelling that name is nothing to look solemn on,
I've a black-letter precedent one might write a column
on.

Orthographical pedantry was not in King Solomon.)

At least hers are, a perfectly natural law

Vide Freud, D. H. Lawrence, and George Bernard
Shaw.

For woman possesses, it seems, an atomic

Attraction for man, and his serio-comic

Pretence of pursuit is a masculine blind

To keep up his prestige within his own mind.

If the lady appears to be fleeing, the stroke

Is a masterly one and just her little joke.

But when this same woman, in some bright confection

Of boudoir attire, gives herself to reflection

And writes down her heart in a freak of exposure,

The result will most certainly jar the composure

Of elderly persons brought up more demurely,

While youth will retire, with doors locked securely,

And read what to them is a gorgeous display

Of Paradise opened on visiting day.

The best gifts of our time are these pure revelations

Of facts as they are in all human relations

With no understatements or exaggerations.

And the West is the East, with the puritan night

Swallowed up in a gush of approaching daylight —

At least, so our cherished delusion mistakes it,
And since everything is as man's attitude makes it,
What the Orient knew we are learning again
For the next generation to laud with 'Amen!'
In this wise are the poems of Jean Untermeyer,
Though the whole of her output takes less than a
 quire

Of paper to hold it. Not at all so with Louis,
He's as rich and eclectic as a bowl of chop-suey.
If his wife plays a timbrel, he plays a ram's horn,
His ardour for worship is never outworn,
One of Joshua's soldiers, protecting his candle
With the pitcher he eagerly holds by the handle,
Tramping his turn at a long sentry-go
Round and round the high walls of our new Jericho;
Or, again, on a harp which, if slightly archaic,
Has lost nothing in tone or in timbre since Hebraic
Psalmists once plucked it in stern exhortations
Before kneeling hosts of the wandering nations.
Through the streets of to-day, with his shoulders set
 square,

He walks, full of business, and yet one's aware
Of a something he sees which surrounds and encloses
His vision, he might be just gazing on Moses
Descending the mountain, but his tables of stone
Have Marx written on them and Debs, while his own
Name has no place at all, and that's characteristic;
His ego's too eager to be egotistic.
When everything beckons, why sit at home brooding
On the opposite wall; he's no taste for secluding

Himself or his interests, and they're only controlled
By the small slice of time which he happens to hold.
Punctiliously present in this exact moment,
His dates began when he learnt what 'proximo' meant.
No glance of his, scanning the past, finds it prizable,
The only real worth is in the realizable;
Neither history nor legend induce him to vary
His perfect allegiance to the mere temporary.
When he takes on himself the rôle of appraiser,
His words spout and gush like a Yellowstone geyser,
At least for the poet whose political ways err
From those of society, an apt paraphraser
Of the poems of such men, he becomes a sharp razor
To others, no hint of the sham sentimental
Escapes his smooth blade, and he is not gentle
With the scenes or the poses in which 'temperamental'
Poets indulge, and he's scarcely parental
To persons with leanings toward the transcendental.
His dictums, it's true, are less poignant than plenty,
And do not rank too high among *cognoscenti*,
Who are usually college boys not quite turned twenty.
He has a blind spot: he cannot keep his eye on
A world without man. Why, a fresh dandelion
Is nothing to him without someone to pick it,
Observe it alone and he hands you the ticket
For exit at once, and it's not a return check.
He hopes in this way to act as a stern check
On all those untoward imaginative flights
In which he is sure he descries signal-lights
Of a shower of earth-wrecking meteorites.

Now why should a man who is so pyrotechnical
Find a mere meteoric display apoplectical,
While many consider it a beautiful spectacle?
That's a matter for wonder; but, speaking of rockets,
He carries them round like small change in his pockets.
A touch and they're off, and the whiz and the flare
And the burst of bright balls are quite his affair.
What a crackle of rhymes! They go off like red crackers
Beneath a tin pan. And there are some whackers
Exploding at intervals when you least expect them,
And long trailing assonances set to connect them.
His wit is a pin-wheel which at first jerks and spits
Then whirls suddenly round as though ten thousand fits
Were in it, and all is one sparkling gyration
In every known manner of versification.
But the best of his fire-works comprise his set-pieces
Which are really so many bright-coloured *esquisses*.
(Please pardon a liberty in pronunciation.
Le mot juste, I believe, needs no justification,
Even when it involves a slight deviation
From the speech of a friendly but jaw-breaking nation,
Who, I trust, will regard this brief explanation
In the light of a willing, though painful, libation.)
But how I run on! To return to my symbol:
A bare two or three poets have ever been nimble
Enough to depict their confrères and show them
Drawn to scale in each feature as all their friends know
 them.
Just glance at them now, each hung on a hook
Awaiting the match — Ftt! Presto! Now, look —

How they flicker and burn, each one to his trick:
There are Robinson's quatrains, Frost's long, pliant
stick

Of blank-verse which he carries when taking his walks,
And Sandburg with his suit-case all crammed full of
talks

With murderers and hobos and such worth while gentry;
Here is Lindsay retreating at speed to the entry
To stand on the stair and harangue new arrivals
With the very same stunts they employ at revivals,
While Amy Lowell, close by the library door,
Announces her theories and tries hard to score
More disciples than Lindsay; though, with his and her
medium,

It's a matter of choice which produces least tedium.
Whoever the poet and whatever his foibles,
Even dull ones like — well, I won't say — are enjoy-
ables

When he touches them up to a glare with his slow-
match.

At this sort of thing every one else is no match
For him, and the best simply rank as ' — and Other
Poets.'

A terrible fellow with his black line to smother poets,
And that line is become the poetical plank
From which he dives into posterity's tank.

It's a curious conceit, and his one bit of swank,
To flaunt himself under a long line of blank.
But what poet, quick or dead, would dare to decline
An immortal existence conferred by one line.

Take it then, Untermeyer, irrepressible Louis,
And observe, as you touch it, that the leaves are still
dewy.

That dew is the proof that it's not bombazine,
One has to be careful with a housewife like Jean.
The lady, you know, is a trifle impulsive,
And I should not like my gift to receive a propulsive
Reception. For fame's rather like millinery,
To-day it's a blossom, to-morrow a cherry,
The day after, glass flowers in some cemetery.
But who, even in fame, would remain stationary?
Not you certainly, Louis, your deepest devotion
Is involved in this question, but you have no notion
How nearly you come to perpetual motion."

Here I ended abruptly. When he's carried a man
To the centre of movement, the historian
Does well to leave off. I left off therefore.
My old friend somewhat wearily asked, "Is there
more?"

"A few odds and ends, but not much you need heed,"
I replied. "Very well, run them over at speed,"
He commanded.

Now if he had wielded a bludgeon
I could not have more quickly obeyed, no curmudgeon
Could have forced my direction more surely than he
did.

His imperious courtesy was all that I needed
To start off again with my tale: "The expatriates
Come next," I began, "but the man who expatiates

Upon them must go all yclad in cold steel
Since these young men are both of them most *difficile*,
And each is possessed of a gift for satire.
Their forked barbs would pierce any usual attire.
In order of merit, if not of publicity,
I will take Eliot first, though it smacks of duplicity
To award Ezra Pound the inferior place
As he simply won't run if not first in a race.
Years ago, 'twould have been the other way round,
With Eliot a rather bad second to Pound.
But Pound has been woefully free with the mustard
And so occupied has quite ruined his custard.
No poems from his pen, just spleen on the loose,
And a man who goes on in that way cooks his goose.
T. S. Eliot's a very unlike proposition,
He has simply won through by process of attrition.
Where Pound played the fool, Eliot acted the wiseacre;
Eliot works in his garden, Pound stultifies his acre.
Eliot's always engaged digging fruit out of dust;
Pound was born in an orchard, but his trees have the
rust.
Eliot's mind is perpetually fixed and alert;
Pound goes off anywhere, anyhow, like a squirt.
Pound believes he's a thinker, but he's far too roman-
tic;
Eliot's sure he's a poet when he's only pedantic.
But Eliot has raised pedantry to a pitch,
While Pound has upset romance into a ditch.
Eliot fears to abandon an old masquerade;
Pound's one perfect happiness is to parade.

Eliot's learning was won at a very great price;
What Pound calls his learning he got in a trice.
Eliot knows what he knows, though he cannot digest
it;

Pound knows nothing at all, but has frequently
guessed it.

Eliot builds up his essays by a process of massing;
Pound's are mostly hot air, what the vulgar call 'gassing.'

Eliot lives like a snail in his shell, pen protruding;
Pound struts like a cock, self-adored, self-deluding.
Pound's darling desire is his ego's projection;
Eliot tortures his soul with a dream of perfection.
Pound's an ardent believer in the value of noise;
Eliot strains every nerve to attain a just poise.
Each despises his fellows, for varying reasons;
Each one is a traitor, but with different treasons.
Each has left his own country, but Pound is quite sick
of it,

While for Eliot's sojourn, he is just in the nick of it.
Pound went gunning for trouble, and got it, for cause;
Eliot, far more astute, has deserved his applause.
Each has more brain than heart, but while one man's a
critic

The other is more than two-thirds tympanitic.
Both of them are book-men, but where Eliot has found
A horizon in letters, Pound has only found Pound.
Each man feels himself so little complete
That he dreads the least commerce with the man in the
street;

Each imagines the world to be leagued in a dim pact
To destroy his immaculate taste by its impact.
To conceive such a notion, one might point out slyly,
Would scarcely occur to an author more highly
Original; such men seldom bother their wits
With outsiders at all, whether fits or misfits.
Where they are, whom they see, is a matter of sheer
Indifference to a poet with his own atmosphere
To exist in, and such have no need to be preachy
Anent commonplaceness since they can't write a
cliché —

In toto, at least, and it's *toto* that grounds
All meticulous poets like the Eliots and Pounds.
Taking up Eliot's poetry, it's a blend of intensive
And elegant satire with a would-be offensive
Kind of virulent diatribe, and neither sort's lacking
In the high type of polish we demand of shoe-blackening.
Watteau if you like, arm in arm with Laforgue,
And both of these worthies laid out in a morgue.
The poems are expert even up to a vice,
But they're chilly and dead like corpses on ice.
Now a man who's reluctant to heat his work through,
I submit, is afraid of what that work will do
On its own, with its muscles and sinews unfrozen.
Something, I must think, which he would not have
chosen.

Is there barely a clue here that the action of heat
Might reveal him akin to the man in the street?
For his brain — there's no doubt that is up on a steeple,
But his heart might betray him as one of the people.

A fearful dilemma! We can hardly abuse him
For hiding the damaging fact and excuse him
If it really be so, and we've more than a hint of it,
Although I, for one, like him better by dint of it.
Since the poet's not the half of him, we must include
The critical anchorite of his 'Sacred Wood.'
'This slim duodecimo you must have your eye on
If you'd be up to date,' say his friends. He's a sly one
To have chosen this format — the book's heavy as iron.
I'm acutely aware that its grave erudition
Is quite in the line of a certain tradition,
That one which is commonly known as tuition.
To read it is much like a lengthy sojourning
In at least two or three institutions of learning.
But, being no schoolboy, I find I'm not burning
For this sort of instruction, and vote for adjourning.
What the fellow's contrived to stuff into his skull
May be certainly classed as a pure miracle,
But the way he imparts it is terribly dull.
This may not be fair, for I've only begun it,
And one should not pronounce on a book till one's done
it,
But I've started so often, in so many places,
I think, had there been any livelier spaces
I must have encountered at least one of those
Before falling, I say it with shame, in a doze.
We must take Ezra Pound from a different angle:
He's a belfry of excellent chimes run to jangle
By being too often and hurriedly tugged at,
And even, when more noise was wanted, just slugged at

And hammered with anything there was lying round.
Such delicate bells could not stand so much Pound.
Few men have to their credit more excellent verses
Than he used to write, and even his worse is
Much better than most people's good. He'd a flair
For just the one word indispensably there,
But which few could have hit on. Another distinction
Was the way he preserved fledgeling poets from extinction.

Had he never consented to write when the urge
To produce was not on him, he'd have been on the
verge

Of a great reputation by now, but his shoulder
Had always its chip, and Ezra's a scolder.
Off he flew, giving nerves and brain up to the business
In a crowing excitement not unmixed with dizziness,
Whenever he could get any sort of newspaper
To lend him a column and just let him vapour.
But while he was worrying his gift of invention
For adequate means to ensure the prevention
Of any one's getting what he had not got,
His uncherished talent succumbed to dry rot.
When, after the battle, he would have employed her,
He learnt, to his cost, that he had destroyed her.
Now he does with her ghost, and the ghosts of the hosts
Of troubadours, minstrels, and kings, for he boasts
An acquaintance with persons of whose very names
I am totally ignorant, likewise their fames.
The foremost, of course, is Bertrand de Born,
He's a sort of pervasively huge leprecaun

Popping out from Pound's lines where you never expect him.

He is our poet's chief lar, so we must not neglect him.
There is Pierre de Maensac, and Pierre won the singing —

Where or how I can't guess, but Pound sets his fame ringing

Because he was *dreitz hom* (whatever that is)
And had De Tierci's wife; what happened to his
We don't know, in fact we know nothing quite clearly,
For Pound always treats his ghosts cavalierly.
There is John Borgia's bath, and be sure that he needed it;

Aurunculeia's shoe, but no one much heeded it.
There's a chap named Navighero and another Barabello,

Who prods a Pope's elephant; and one Mozarello;
Savairic Mauleon — Good Lord, what a dance
Of impossible names! First I think we're in France,
Then he slides in Odysseus, and Eros, and Atthis —
But I'm not to be fooled in my Greek, that's what that is.

Yet, look, there's Italian sticking out in italics
And French in plain type, the foreign vocalics
Do give one the feeling of infinite background,
When it's all just a trick of that consummate quack,
Pound,

To cheat us to thinking there's something behind it.
But, when nothing's to find, it's a hard job to find it.

The tragedy lies in the fact that the man
Had a potentiality such as few can
Look back to or forward to; had he but kept it,
There's no bar in all poetry but he might have leapt it.
Even now, I believe, if he'd let himself grow,
He might start again . . ." "We will have no 'although'
In your gamut of poets. Your man is a victim
Of expatriation, and, as usual, it's licked him.
It has happened more times than I care to reflect,
And the general toll is two countries' neglect."
The old gentleman sighed. "I presume that you've finished,"

He went on at last. "The ranks are diminished,"
I answered, "but still there remain one or two
Whose names, at the least, I must pass in review.

There's William Rose Benét, his poems have no beaters
In their own special *genre*; he's a wonder with metres,
A sleight of hand artist, and one of his mysteries
Is his cabinet trick with all the world's histories.
There's Bodenheim, trowel in hand, bent on laying
A tessellate floor with the words he is saying.
Squares of marble, moss-agate, and jade, and carnelian,
Byzantium *in pleno*, never Delphic nor Delion.
A perfect example of contemporaneity,
But with too little force and too much femininity.
The man's a cascade of verbose spontaneity.
Except when he's giving Advice, there he shines
And La Fontaine plays hide and seek in his lines.
As a maker of Fables, no one ever quarrels

With his style, and old Æsop must look to his laurels.
There's another young man who strums a clavier
And prints a new poem every third or fourth year.
Looking back, I don't know that anything since
Has delighted me more than his 'Peter Quince.'
He has published no book and adopts this as pose,
But it's rather more likely, I think, to suppose
The particular gift he's received from the Muses
Is a tufted green field under whose grass there oozes
A seeping of poetry, like wind through a cloister;
On occasion it rises, and then the field's moister
And he has a poem if he'll trouble to bale it,
Address it to 'Poetry,' and afterwards mail it.
His name, though the odds overbalance the evens
Of those who don't know it as yet's Wallace Stevens,
But it might be John Doe for all he seems to care —
A little fine work scattered into the air
By the wind, it appears, and he quite unaware
Of the fact, since his motto's a cool '*laissez-faire*.'
There's Edna Millay with her 'Aria da Cap-
O'h, she dealt all society a pretty sharp rap
With that bauble of hers, be it drama or fable,
Which I certainly trust won't be laid on the table
In my time. Her 'Bean-Stalk' is a nice bit of greenery,
For one of her charms is her most charming scenery,
Few can handle more deftly this sort of machinery.
But I must call a halt, or your brain will be flooded
With big poets, and little poets, and poets not yet
budded."

"Have you really so many?" my old friend desired

To know. "If you count all the ones who've aspired,
I could go on all night. You see we have got
A Renaissance on." "Dear me, I forgot,"
He remarked somewhat dryly. "We were not renaiss-
sant,

But also I note we were far less complacent
Than you seem to be, and this beggar-my-neighbour
Game you all indulge in was no part of our labour."
"No," I told him, "you played on a pipe and a tabour;
We go girt with a shield and drawing a sabre.
And yet you, with Miranda . . ." I talked to the swell
Of the wide-running river, to a clock-striking bell.
There was no one beside me. A wave caught the sedge
Of the bank and went ruffling along its soft edge.
Behind me a motor honked twice, and the bridges
Glared suddenly out of the dusk, twinkling ridges
Notched into the dim river-line. Wind was whirling
The plane-trees about, it sent the waves curling
Across one another in a chuckle of laughter —
And I recollect nothing that happened thereafter.
Who my gentleman was, if you hazard a guess,
I will tell you I know nothing more, nothing less,
Than I here have set forth. For I never have met him
From that day to this, or I should have beset him.
With questions, I think. My unique perseverance
Kept me haunting the river for his reappearance,
Armed with two or three books which might serve as
a primer

To point my remarks, for I am no skimmer,
When I push at a wheel it must go or I'll break it,

Once embarked on a mission I never forsake it.
Did he guess my intention and think he'd enough
Of me and my poets, a sufficient rebuff;
But I've never believed he went off in a huff.
Did I dream him perhaps? Was he only a bluff
Of the past making sport with my brain? But that's
stuff!

Take it what way you like, if he were a spectre
Then the ghosts of old poets have received a correcter
Account than they had of us, and may elect a
Prize winner and vote over post-prandial nectar.
Suppose that, before awarding the prize,
The poets had determined to sift truth from lies
And had sent an ambassador down to enquire
Whose flames were cut tinsel and whose were real fire.
Selecting a man once employed in the trade,
They had only to wait the report that he made
And discuss it at *al fresco* lunch in the shade
Of some cloudy and laurel-embowered arcade.
Supposing it happened that their emissary
Determined to take me as a tutelary
Genius to guide him, and after he'd pumped me
Of all that I knew, quite naturally dumped me
And returned whence he came. You call this bizarre?
But then, after all, so many things are!
If it were so, at least the conclave knows who's who,
And will see there's no reason at all to pooh-pooh.
I, for one, am most eager to know what they'll do.
Aren't you?

y

